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A reappraisal of the political philosophy of Vaclav Havel

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A Reappraisal of the Political Philosophy of Václav Havel

Presented By

Daniel Brennan

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
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Abstract

This thesis argues that Václav Havel presents a cohesive political philosophy which I term liberal agonism. In the thesis I explore the main influences on Havel's political philosophy. I describe what Havel means by his famous maxim 'live in truth,' claiming that what Havel means is that to live in truth, one must continually engage in a process of self-agonism in order to be existentially honest with oneself. Further to this, I claim that in Havel's writings there is the idea that in order for self-agonism to be fully utilised, the state must take an active interest in encouraging self-agonism through a liberal philosophy.

The thesis explores Havel's intellectual debt to Martin Heidegger and argues that Havel has a very different philosophy to Heidegger, particularly in respect to the purpose and value of art. Havel sees art as a means for political change and Heidegger sees art as a way to reveal Being. The main influence on Havel is Jan Patočka, and the thesis explores at length the intellectual debt that Havel owes Patočka. Where some scholars see Havel as a repeater of Patočka's ideas, a better view is that Havel has his own unique engagement with Patočka. From Patočka, Havel acquires an engagement with the Czech phenomenological tradition. His phenomenological outlook informs his political philosophy. Havel also employs the language of existentialism, and hence I compare Havel's views on authenticity with those of John Paul Sartre, claiming that living in truth is best understood as an existential concept.

I am aware of the breadth of meanings to the term existential and am here using the word to describe a kind of thinking that begins with the human subject. Havel begins his analysis of the human with the existence of man as a given starting point. He is interested in the question 'what does it mean to be?' Existentialists approach such a question by exploring the ways that being manifests in the world. That is by looking at the

modes of existence one can explore the meaning of that mode. Existentialism is not a philosophy that is looking for the thing in itself; rather, existentialists view the human subject as a being thrown into a practically meaningless universe and attempt to supply meaning to the subject through reading the actions of a subject as acting in freedom. That is the freedom of the subject to act, in a meaningless universe, gives the subject's actions meaning as they are chosen actions. A failure to account for one's actions to oneself is to act in an inauthentic way.

Throughout his career Havel demonstrated a mistrust of the way that language can be ideologically manipulated to coerce behaviour. This thesis demonstrates the importance of this idea by exploring Havel's views about political discourse developed through his plays and selected writings on the issue. After scaffolding Havel's philosophy through the examination of his main concerns and major influences, this thesis spells out Havel's own unique political philosophy. I argue that a liberal agonism is a political philosophy in which the state allows, celebrates and encourages a process of self-interrogation through which existential identities are expressed and acted upon.

Statement of Originality

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

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November 2012

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my good friends, Andreas Berg and Russell McPhee, for sharing my enthusiasm and in my search.

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In the production of a thesis there are of course many people to acknowledge. I must acknowledge my friends and family, as is usual, and for the usual reasons - important reasons. Your support has been invaluable and I would not be submitting without your help.

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Most importantly, I must acknowledge my primary supervisor Damian Cox. From the infancy of this project, Damian has been an enthusiastic bouncing board for my ideas - not all of them good. His critique has been supportive, scathing, constructive, and always with a view to finding the bigger picture. I have learnt to think better, write better, teach better, and be a better philosopher through my interactions with Damian over the last few years.

Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Statement of Originality	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Contents	vii
Introduction	9
Chapter 1: Is Havel a Heideggerian?	20
Introduction	20
A Shared Nomenclature; but Differing Goals	22
Heidegger, Havel and Technology.....	28
The Political Significance of Art.....	49
Conclusion	56
Chapter 2: Exploration of a Religious Element in Havel’s Political Philosophy	58
Introduction	58
Some Problems with Being as God.....	60
Havel’s Being.....	67
Doing politics Without Metaphysical Certainty.....	78
Conclusion	93
Chapter 3: The Influence of Jan Patočka	95
Introduction	95
Patočka, Havel and Arendt.....	100
Patočka, Havel and History	112
Patočka Plato & Havel	118
Patočka’s Critique of Ideology and the Influence of that Critique on Havel	126
Conclusion	131
Chapter 4: Further Explorations of a Patočkean Thread in Havel’s Writing.....	133
Introduction	133
Asubjective Phenomenology	133
Language and Patočka	137
Patočka’s Thoughts on Plato and Logos	144
Havel’s appropriation of the Greek Element of Patočka’s Thought	154
Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War.....	162
Conclusion	172
Chapter 5: Living in Truth as an Existential Concept.....	174
Introduction	174

The Existential Nature of a Life in Truth	176
Comparison of Havel's Thoughts on Language to 'Bad Faith'	182
Facticity and Responsibility in 'Audience'	191
Conclusion	195
Chapter 6: Havel's Concern for Meaningful Political Discourse	196
Introduction	196
Havel's Writings and Thoughts Regarding Language	196
The Garden Party	199
The Memorandum	206
The increased Difficulty of Concentration	208
Language and Discourse in 'Letters to Olga' & 'Open Letters'	210
Charter 77 and Meaningful Political Discourse	213
Conclusion	220
Chapter 7: Václav Havel's Political Philosophy as a Liberal Philosophy.	222
Introduction	222
Havel's Liberalism	222
Is Havel a Perfectionist?	229
Havel's Brand of Liberalism	240
Sources of Havel's Liberalism	242
Conclusion	246
Chapter 8: Havel's Liberal Agonism.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction:	248
What is Liberal Agonism?	249
Liberal Agonism Further Explored	254
Havel's Liberal Agonism and Chantal Mouffe's Agonism.....	258
Havel's Responsibility and the Liberal Conception of the Self	264
Havel's Post-nationalism	269
Conclusion	274
Conclusion	276
What I Have Argued	276
The Significance of Liberal Agonism	281
Works Cited	291

Introduction

Václav Havel died on the eighteenth of December 2011. A matter of hours earlier the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il had also passed away. I was working on this thesis when I heard about the deaths, hence a comparison between the two men was inevitable; and it wasn't long before I saw news articles comparing both men's role in the twentieth and early twenty-first century.

I had been re-reading Havel's essay *Article 203* which explores a particular law in late socialist Czechoslovakia which prosecutes people who are regarded under the vague term 'parasites.'¹ A parasite is someone who deviates from the socially accepted norm and the socially accepted is the state sponsored notion of the norm. A person who doesn't work at their assigned job is a parasite, a person who works illegally for some extra money is a parasite, and people who refuse to work in one industry because they have skills in another are also considered parasites. Havel argues that the reason this law exists is that the state saw the role of each person in the nation as a cog in a machine; producing, without freedom. I was reminded of the image of the machine from Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian novel 'We' of the scary beauty of a well-functioning machine where there is no friction to be caused by the chaotic effects of freedom – everything moves in a well-choreographed dance, what the narrator D-503 describes as "nonfreedom".² For Havel, such a law is evidence that the state views the individual as "mere cogs in the social machinery, cogs that have meaning only insofar as they blindly carry out the function assigned to them."³ For Havel when the state views the individual

1 Václav Havel *Open Letters* (New York: Vintage Books), 117.

2 Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans Clarence Brown, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), 6.

Upon witnessing the harmonious work being performed on the space ship INTEGRAL, and declaring the labour, which he calls a dance, to be beautiful, the narrator, D-503 writes in his diary, "But why – my thoughts continued – why beautiful? Why is the dance beautiful? Answer: because it is *nonfree* movement, because all the fundamental significance of the dance lies precisely in its aesthetic subjection, its ideal nonfreedom." (6).

3 Havel *Open Letters*, 121.

as a performer of a role set by the state, this presupposes that “the machine operator must be able to check on the cogs at all times”.⁴ Havel defends the role of parasites arguing that their refusal to settle into the grey monstrosities of communist housing blocks tell a story whose colour stands out against the greyness of the age. This is the role of the dissident in Havel’s writings, to be the stinging fly that awakens the polis to authentic action, to realise its freedom rather than to succumb to its state prescribed role. That is, the dissident is to be the example of transcendence to those stuck in immanence.

Kim Jong Il on the other hand was one of the “machine operators,” a maniacal dictator of whom the myth of his cruelty has reached a level of absurdity. Kim Jong Il manipulated the behaviour of his citizens to such a degree that North Korea is now one of the least free places on the planet. Dissidence is quickly and ruthlessly quashed with a state violence that is probably unequalled on the planet. He stands in some regards as the polar opposite of Havel; but I think these comparisons can be dangerous to the memory of Havel despite the intent to show what a moral dynamo Havel was by contrasting him with the towering figure of evil, Kim Jong Il.

Perusing the various eulogies that came out after the deaths, I found that many journalists wanted to draw the sharp distinction between the two figures. But there is something concerning in these comparisons. They obscure the real legacy of Havel by making him the polar opposite of Kim Jong Il’s obvious totalitarian regime. Slavoj Žižek has constantly criticised Havel for being a naïve dissident and the eulogies which contrast Havel with Kim Jong Il, I think, open Havel up to such criticisms by making his moral message to politics so pure that it becomes an obscure call to end totalitarianism.⁵ My point is that Havel has a relevance far wider than his specific role as dissident against

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Žižek’s criticisms will be discussed in Chapter two.

the totalitarian element to late socialism, what Havel called post-totalitarianism.⁶

Eulogies that praise Havel's role in transforming Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic into a liberal democracy are correct to point out Havel's achievements here; however I contend that there is a much richer intellectual legacy that many of the eulogies leave out.⁷ If Havel stands against the evils of Kim Jong Il. Then what can he say about smaller evils in the western world today?

In putting Havel as the dialectical opposite to Kim Jong Il, the danger is that Havel is left with nothing to say about contemporary western society. Or to put it differently, if Havel is a voice against extreme state terror, then he is mute on problems closer to home. Making Havel the giant slayer blunts real contribution to an analysis of contemporary problems in western politics, which, although not nearly as extreme as the problems facing the North Korean citizen, are still alarming. The view that the state, under late socialism, saw citizens as performers of specific roles, I think is still highly relevant when considering the role of citizens in society in the conditions of late capitalism. We who live in the neo-liberal age are being coerced to 'consume' lest our way of life lose its potency for freedom and security.⁸ One eulogy for Havel, by Aljazeera,

6 Post-totalitarianism is Havel's coinage to explain the shift in totalitarian power away from a dictator, to the ideology itself. In that sense the individual's running the nation are inconsequential as the power of the state machine's usurps those individuals.

See Václav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless" in *Open Letters*, 131.

7 Editorial "Kim Jong Il and Václav Havel: Two leaders a world apart" *L.A. Times*, December 20, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/20/opinion/la-ed-kim-20111220>

Joe Schlesinger, "Kim Jong-il and Václav Havel, the extremes of our age" *CBC News*, December 21, 2011. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2011/12/21/f-vp-schlesinger.html>

Tereza Nemessanyi, "On Václav Havel, Kim Jong Il and Regular Russian Citizens" *Huffington Post*, December 22, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tereza-nemessanyi/on-Václav-Havel-kim-jongi_b_1163871.html

8 On October 11 2001, one month after the September 11 attacks on the World trade Centre buildings in New York, then President George W. Bush announced "Now, the American people have got to go about their business. We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don't -- where we don't conduct business, where people don't shop. That's their intention." The normal activity of a U.S. citizen is hence defined as consuming. The loss of economic growth that a lowering of consumption brings is considered fearful by the politicians of the war on terror. I consider viewing the roles of citizens as producers and consumers in late socialism to be analogous to the consideration of citizens as consumers in the neoliberal ideology. See White House Archive, "President Holds Prime Time News Conference" October 11, 2001, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>

hit the nail on the head with his real legacy, referring to the memory of Havel by his fellow Czech citizens.

Czechs, given their growing dissatisfaction with the current political system's omnipresent corruption and other failings, have increasingly come to appreciate the importance of Havel's moral appeals. In fact, now, after his death, he is well on the way to being lionised as someone who foresaw many current problems, and not only at home: While still President, he repeatedly called attention to the self-destructive forces of industrial civilisation and global capitalism.⁹

I don't want to take away from Havel's credentials as a world figure standing out against dictators; but I do think that Havel has quite a lot to offer the study of political philosophy in a more nuanced and complex way. The man who as a moral authority can say, perhaps naively, that China has a responsibility to assist protesting monks in Burma, is also the creator of, I contend, an interesting political philosophy that can help to explain how ideologies are able to coerce individuals to self-deceive in order to promote certain behaviours.¹⁰ His politics are quite simple, if individuals are existentially honest with themselves, then they are responsible for each other, and they hold institutions to account because they are honest about the activities of institutions in which they are involved.¹¹ Throughout his career, I contend, Havel never deviated from the above sentiments. What I will do in this thesis, is show Havel's influences in arriving at this position, show what concerns Havel has that are necessitated by this position, and spell out just what kind of political philosophy underlies such a position. The conclusion that I

9 Jirí Pehe "Václav Havel's life in truth" *Aljazeera*. December 19, 2011.
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/12/20111219851022417.html> (Accessed December 30, 2011).

10 Václav Havel "Struggling Alone," *The Guardian*, September 27, 2007.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/sep/27/strugglingalone> (accessed September 28, 2007).

11 See Martin Matušík, *Postnational Identity; critical theory and existential philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel*. New York: Guilford, 1993.

will make is that Havel offers a liberal political philosophy of which agonism is a strong feature; hence I will term Havel's political philosophy liberal agonism.

Havel is a product of the culture of Czech dissidence.¹² Living under the conditions of late-socialism, Havel became a dramatist, writing plays that were obviously critical of the role of ideology in people's behaviour. Havel infused the mis-en-scène of his dramas with absurdity to reflect just how far from authenticity ideological living was. Philosophically, Havel is influenced by three major thinkers, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas and Jan Patočka, especially the latter. Havel makes explicit mention of reading Heidegger and Levinas in his prison letters sent to his wife, published as the volume, *Letters to Olga*, but it is hard to claim that Havel applies rigorous study to any philosopher and it is doubtful that Havel ever sat down to read the Heideggerian oeuvre in any depth.¹³ He claims to have read an essay by Levinas translated for him by his brother Ivan.¹⁴ Again this is no detailed study of Levinas' project; but, like Heidegger, Havel does borrow some philosophical ideas from Levinas.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will explore the Heideggerian flavour of Havel's ideas. I have deliberately not included a chapter on Levinas because I believe that, while Levinas might seem to be the appropriate lens with which to analyse Havel, Patočka supplies a better entry. I am not denying that Havel is reading Levinas, and has Levinas on his mind, when he writes many of his most philosophically rich prison letters in *Letters to Olga*; however, I contend that Havel is using Levinas as a litmus test to explore his already formed ideas. In fact in *Letters to Olga*, Havel writes that while reading Levinas,

12 Edward Findlay "Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique: Political Philosophy in Václav Havel and Jan Patočka" *The Review of Politics* 61, no.3 (1999): 403.

13 In a conversation I had with Ivan Chvatik, a student of Patočka's and the director of the Jan Patočka archive in Prague, Professor Chvatik made the point that the problem with studying philosophy for Havel was that he was always in jail. Havel's involvement in dissident movements, not just as an intellectual, but as an actor in them led him to have a very busy life that differs from the hermit-like existence of the intellectual with time to read voluminous amounts of philosophy. My point is that what Havel read, he appropriated, and he read selectively.

14 Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1989), 311.

he is furiously thinking through Levinas' ideas; but Havel adds that he has a feeling like he has read these ideas before.¹⁵ I argue he had at least encountered ideas similar to Levinas' in his encounter with Patočka. In addition, Havel, while writing about his reading of Levinas, leaves a promissory note that he desires a future time when he can really sit down with Levinas. This future encounter does not happen, although Havel does mention Levinas numerous more times in the collected letters. Havel even admits to not being able to understand the depth and breadth of Levinas' thought regarding responsibility, which could be another example of Havel's feigned ignorance in philosophical matters; however, I argue that there is something to this admission.¹⁶ Havel, in prison, does not engage systematically with Levinas' thought in the same way that he takes on Heidegger's critique of technology and modernity. This will be even more clear if I take a moment to explore Levinas' responsibility in Havel's work.

A major idea in Levinas' work is that ethics precedes ontology. Havel gives a lot of currency to this idea and in *Letters to Olga* he claims that he fully agrees with Levinas' assertion if Levinas means that responsibility is something primal and vital, and if responsibility is something we are thrown into and which precedes freedom.¹⁷ Havel then adds that he feels as if he's always believed this before he read Levinas.¹⁸ I think this is correct even if Havel doesn't spell out where he might have heard such ideas before. Similar ideas are in Patočka's philosophy as well. For Patočka, the individual finds itself (the I), in the search for itself, in its thrownness and in recognition of the self's responsibility to the world and to others that share its situation and upon which it impacts. Hence although Levinas is a presence in *Letters to Olga*, I will focus in this

¹⁵ Ibid 314

¹⁶ Ibid 322

¹⁷ Ibid 322-323

¹⁸ Ibid 323

thesis on the impact of Heidegger and Patočka's thought on Havel, because, as we shall see, these are more useful tools with which to explore Havel's thought.

As mentioned, Patočka is a very strong influence on Havel's thinking as Patočka's philosophy left a mark on the culture of Czech dissidence as a whole, especially with his involvement as the spokesperson for the movement Charter 77.¹⁹ Havel attended seminars by Patočka, was involved with Charter 77 with him, and remained a strong supporter of Patočka's legacy after Patočka's premature death in the wake of an interrogation over his involvement with Charter 77. Edward Findlay claims that Havel's philosophical thought is just a rehashing of the themes of Patočka's work, and hence any reading of Havel is not complete without a reading of Patočka.²⁰ I agree with Findlay to a point. While it is true that Havel must be read in the light of Patočka's philosophy, it is unfair to claim that Havel's contribution to philosophy is not unique. For example, Findlay notes that in the article, 'A Call for Sacrifice: The Co-responsibility of the West' published in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Havel mentions Patočka's contention "a life not willing to sacrifice itself to what makes it meaningful is not living."²¹ Findlay goes on to write that Havel in neither essay philosophically develops the idea of sacrifice, deferring to Patočka. To an extent this is the correct reading; however Findlay is too quick to dismiss Havel. In this thesis I will argue that Havel has a different aim for his thought than Patočka. Patočka is a philosopher who wants to develop his ideas in a rigorous philosophical way. Havel on the other hand is a thinker who wants to apply his thinking to concrete political

19 See Findlay "Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique"

See also Edward Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

Avazier Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

20 See Findlay "Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique".

21 Findlay "Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique" 409

Václav Havel, "A Call for Sacrifice: The Co-responsibility of the West" *Foreign Affairs* 73, no.2 (1994): 2-6

problems, with the aim of influencing the public sphere. Havel does borrow from Patočka, and at times he does defer to Patočka for philosophical justification, as Findlay claims; but it must be noted that their projects are different and that Havel uses Patočka to ends that Patočka did not anticipate.

If we consider the *Foreign Affairs* article, this difference becomes clear. Havel is arguing that Western Europe needs to consider its responsibility to the post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of communism. Havel is arguing that the West needs to consider that it has possibly lost its possession of values worth sacrificing for, as the ideology of the free market has flourished, destroying the seedbed of those values that Havel looked to the west for before the collapse of socialism. Findlay is right; Havel does not give a detailed philosophical explanation of sacrifice, but that is because he sees his role as philosopher differently.²² For Havel, his role is to point to the problems of the polis, or in other words to show the world as a problem. His article in *Foreign Affairs* does not give a rigorous account of sacrifice, as Patočka does in his *Heretical Essays*; however, conversely, Patočka does not apply his philosophy to contemporary Czech problems, stopping his philosophy of history at the Second World War in *The Heretical Essays*. I think that James Pontusso sums up the situation well in disregarding Findlay's dismissal of Havel, "for those who have read the works of contemporary academic philosophers, Havel's "search" for himself is not

22 In *Letters to Olga* Havel writes, "I have never created, or accepted, any comprehensive "worldview," let alone any complete, unified, integrated and self-contained philosophical, ideological or other system of beliefs which... I could identify with and which would provide answers to all of my questions." (p. 190). Hence my positioning of Havel as a philosopher might seem a little strange. But I do not think that one needs to work out a complete philosophical system in order to be a philosopher. Rather Havel does have coherent standpoints that I will spell out in the last chapter.

James Sire and James Pontusso, in their book length studies of Havel's thought both have chosen to ignore Havel's insistence that he is not a philosopher as well. Sire points out that in the same book, *Letters to Olga*, where Havel denies having a worldview, he comes very close to offering one (Sire p. 54, Pontusso 16).

See James Pontusso, *Václav Havel; Civic Responsibility in a Postmodern Age* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

James Sire, *Václav Havel; The Intellectual Conscience of International Politics* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2001).

probably but surely more penetrating than any systematic philosophic text.”²³ That is the lack of conceptual rigour is not evidence of poor thinking; Havel’s thought, whilst not contributing to the epistemology of phenomenology, does offer an interesting way for a political application of a phenomenologically grounded thinking.

It is correct that Havel is a Patočkean thinker; however he does not simply repeat Patočka’s ideas; but instead applies those ideas to practical politics in a way that reveals an individual and coherent position. My argument is that Havel offers a liberal political standpoint, one that I am terming in this thesis liberal agonism.

According to Findlay, Havel claimed,

[t]hat a politics of freedom and democracy will have its most universal appeal when it justifies its principles, not on foundations such as those implicit in the ideological positions of either liberalism or socialism, but on the basis of an ontological and phenomenological understanding of humanity that rejects abstraction and the pull of ideology.²⁴

I agree with this thought, but I want to add a twist. For Havel, such an ontological grounding of principles is only possible in a state which respects and encourages the individual’s ability to authentically become aware of their responsibility and hence ground their individual actions in such an ontology of humanity. I contend that the state that best encourages such activity is a liberal state, and I will argue that Havel’s political standpoint is characteristic of a liberal. Havel saw his role as dissident to defend and protect the individual’s right to express their existential identities. The state, for Havel, should be a neutral entity whose aim should be to encourage citizens to engage in a kind of phenomenological self-examination to authentically realise their responsibility. This is a position informed by Patočka, but it is distinctly Havel’s as well, as I shall demonstrate.

²³ Pontusso *Václav Havel*, 16

²⁴ Findlay *Caring for the Soul* 184

Ultimately this thesis is a reappraisal of the political philosophy of Havel. I think that now, especially in the year following his death, a re-reading of Havel's work is a useful task in establishing just what legacy Havel has left. Through exploring the influence of Heidegger and Patočka on Havel, I will elaborate Havel's continued concern with ideological manipulations of discourse in the public sphere and demonstrate how his idea of a life in truth is best understood in existential terms rather than religious terms. I will spell out the foundations of Havel's liberalism and explain just what a liberal agonism is. Liberalism is a difficult and loaded term. Perhaps it is best, as Alan Ryan does, to consider liberalism more as a set of liberalisms rather than one all-encompassing concept.²⁵ Liberals themselves disagree on what constitutes liberalism. Ryan suggests that the myriad forms of liberalism are better understood in terms of what they are against than attempting to define them as a single doctrine. He argues that liberals are more or less united in their anti-absolutism, anti-theocracy, and anti-capitalism. Each of these antipathies, of course, comes with caveats. Ryan also points out that liberals share a focus on the individual and more importantly a focus on promoting the autonomy of the individual. As this thesis will point out, Vaclav Havel shares with liberals the opposition to absolutism, the promotion of toleration, a healthy fear of the market as a source of moral good, and most importantly the promotion of individual autonomy. Hence I argue that Havel is a liberal.

I will conclude this introduction by making a comment on the style and method of this thesis. Havel is an interesting thinker for me in part because of his ambiguity. He denies being a philosopher, he denies having a position, and yet when I read him, I find him to both express philosophical arguments and to hold cohesive positions. But he can be vague. To overcome the ambiguity in Havel's writings, and lack of systematic thought, I

²⁵Alan Ryan, "Liberalism" *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Goodin & Philip Pettit, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers; 1993), 291-293

will be comparing Havel's positions to those of his influences and other key thinkers who I think are pertinent to drawing out Havel's ideas. In this I will, in a sense, be explaining who Havel the political philosopher is, by explaining who Havel is not. By offering some systematic rigorous arguments by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Chantal Mouffe and John Stuart Mill to name a few, I set up arguments for Havel to either agree or disagree with. This is advantageous for two reasons. First it can fill in the gaps that Havel might have left in his thinking. Second, it situates Havel amongst some of the more established philosophical minds of recent times. Ultimately I believe that Havel's political philosophy is responsible, timely, pragmatic and philosophically rich.

Chapter 1: Is Havel a Heideggerian?

Introduction

In this chapter I explore Heideggerian themes in Havel's works. The philosophy of Martin Heidegger is a promising starting point for an analysis of Havel's political philosophy as Havel is explicit on numerous occasions that his reading of Heidegger is important for him. The ethical treatment of Being that marks Havel's thought might make a comparison of Emmanuel Levinas and Havel seem like a more useful choice, but Havel's encounter with Levinas is limited. He read a translation of Levinas, made by his brother, whilst in prison.²⁶

Havel's encounter with Levinas in *Letters to Olga* is interesting, but ultimately, I contend, not that useful in spelling out Havel's position. That is because Havel seems to have already worked his ideas out by the time he reads Levinas in prison. Levinas is employed by Havel as a sounding board for him to test his idea of responsibility. He admits that he has probably failed to fully digest all of the ideas in the work, but does note that on the priority of responsibility over identity Havel finds that Levinas helps him reformulate his ideas.²⁷ But I do not think that this reformulation represents a significant change. Havel had believed that our authentic identity is based on our responsibility before he first read Levinas. This understanding of responsibility and identity appears to be an obvious insight of Patočka's, passed on to Havel. Not a result of Havel's having read Levinas. Havel names Levinas an inspiration, whereas Heidegger and Patočka are more fruitful sources of ideas. Aviezier Tucker, in his article "Vaclav Havel's

²⁶ Martin Matušík explores Havel as a thinker influenced by Levinas. Matušík makes his analysis however based only on those prison letters written by Havel as he was reading the translation of Levinas made for him by his brother Ivan. Matušík *Postnational Identity*, 190-192.

²⁷ Havel *Letters to Olga* 312.

Heideggerianism” claims that Heidegger and Patočka are the two strongest influences on Havel.²⁸

By comparison, in *Letters to Olga*, Havel makes numerous mentions of engagement with Heidegger’s thought.²⁹ Also, much of the secondary literature treats Heidegger as the major influence on Havel³⁰ (apart from the obvious influence of Jan Patočka whose thought and its relation to Havel will be elaborated in chapters three and four). Havel’s mentor, Jan Patočka, produced a phenomenology that is critical of many of Heidegger’s pronouncements, and much of that critique of Heidegger is present in Havel’s writings. Hence a central aim of this chapter is to tease out exactly how Heideggerian Havel’s political philosophy is.

Due to the strong commitment to politics and the political that is present in Havel’s work, Heidegger is something of a red-herring in Havel scholarship. More than that, Havel’s philosophy represents a meaningful move past Heidegger’s in that the call for meaningful political action in Havel’s work is a practical answer to the crisis of modernity that both Havel and Heidegger articulate. Both Havel and Heidegger share a conception of a crisis in modernity due to the increase in ‘technological thinking’ – that is that technology in ever increasing ways, is defining our thoughts and taking us further away from the question of Being. The result of this technologism, is nihilism. Havel and Heidegger differ, however, in their approach to solving the crisis. Where I read Heidegger (especially the later Heidegger) as failing to provide an adequate response to the crisis of nihilism in modernity, Havel offers a practical political philosophy which is able to address the crisis in a meaningful way. This chapter will explain how Havel’s political

28 Aviezer Tucker “Václav Havel’s Heideggerianism,” *Telos* 21, (1990): 64.

29 This is noted by translator Paul Wilson in his introduction to *Letters to Olga* p.17.

30 Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 143.

Sire, *Václav Havel*, 55.

Pontusso, *Václav Havel*, 20.

philosophy is essentially a practical philosophy that operates from a Heideggerian perspective, past the inaction of Heidegger.

A Shared Nomenclature; but Differing Goals

This section will explore Havel's use of two Heideggerian terms, Being and thrownness. A latent concept in Havel's thought, as noted by Tucker, is the Heideggerian concept of everydayness, this concept will be explored in Havel's work as well.

For Heidegger, Dasein is in a condition of 'thrownness,' that is, the human being finds themselves thrust into the world, in a situation which is not of their choosing and which is out of their control. The world is full of others and in encountering the other, Dasein identifies as a 'they,' which for Heidegger, means that as Dasein has everydayness thrust upon it, it subjects itself to the they and loses its sense of its Being and its autonomy.³¹ Havel, as Tucker writes, shares, to an extent, Heidegger's analysis of thrownness.³² However I want to point out a key subtle difference which Tucker seems to miss. For Havel the state of thrownness is the creation of the space for transcendence. Heidegger laments the loss of autonomy in identifying with the 'they' and for Havel, this autonomy can be regained through a life in truth. One can live authentically amongst the they.

Havel, throughout his writing makes reference to Being. An interesting question to ask is to what extent is Havel's Being the same as Heidegger's understanding of Being? In letter 140 of *Letters to Olga*, Havel writes,

But what is it, this rather cryptic "Being"? I've been using the term for too long now not to feel that the time has come to throw a little light on it. I'm not

31 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Row, 2008) 163-168.

32 Tucker, "Havel's Heideggerianism," 67-70.

entirely happy doing so: its blurred, “soft” and unclear character suits me, for it corresponds precisely to the mysterious haziness of what I’m indicating by the term; I like the fact that in every context or sentence it has a slightly different semantic colouring, and I know that any attempt to define it will, at the same time, impoverish, flatten and weaken its uncertain semantic radiations...

...My only true certain and indisputable experience is the experience of Being in the simplest sense of the word, that is, the experience that something is.³³

It is significant that Havel deliberately leaves the term vague and actually seems to celebrate the enigmatic nature of Being. The description of Being as an essence of existence might be read in a Heideggerian way, but there are other possible interpretations and I think that moving away from Heidegger is more in the spirit of Havel’s texts. If you were to ask Havel if he is a Heideggerian, I am sure the answer would be no. For Heidegger Being is something that modernity has completely lost orientation towards, and for Havel, Being is a part of ordinary experience, as this chapter will demonstrate. Havel has actually shifted away from Heidegger, if indeed he is even responding to Heidegger,³⁴ in that for Havel, Being is moral and Being is our best experience of essential humanity expressed as an appreciation of responsibility. Uncovering Being for Havel is political; because humanity is necessarily pluralistic and so the Being of man involves humans living together. For these reasons Havel’s Being is best understood as dissimilar to Heidegger’s Being. Such a strong move away from

33 Havel, *Letters to Olga* 358.

34 See chapters three and four for an explication of the influence of Jan Patočka on Havel, which is far stronger and has far more evidence to support the link, than does the link to Heidegger’s philosophy.

Heidegger is missing from most scholarship on Havel that treats Heidegger as an influence.

Relying too much on Heidegger's philosophy to fill in gaps in Havel's philosophical writing is dangerous because both thinkers have fundamentally different conceptions of what constitutes Being. I make this point because James Sire, Aviezer Tucker, and James Pontusso, in their studies of Havel's philosophy, are adamant that Heidegger's thought can explain Havel's. I agree that Heidegger is an influence on Havel, but one of the main aims of this chapter is to tease out some key differences in their thought. Pontusso writes that Havel's thought is best regarded as a fundamental agreement with Heidegger's critique of the contemporary world, and a profound disagreement with Heidegger's exploration of the nature and character of Being.³⁵ This is a view in support of my own, but Pontusso seems to take it for granted that Heidegger and Havel mean the same thing when they write of Being, and the difference is found in the particulars. This is incorrect. Fundamentally Havel and Heidegger are opposed on the nature of Being, and are even talking about different things.

What Havel means by Being is very vague. This is not necessarily a negative in Havel's writings, as his focus is, when he is at his best, on the political. Being, for Havel, is a presupposition, and he is concerned about acting with this knowledge in a political way. Heidegger's project was to try and use human thinking to uncover or reveal Being. This is not Havel's project. For Havel, Being is true and stable, and a part of the ordinary experience of human life, albeit a more primordial experience than any ontic category of existence - for if being is a no-thing, then, for Havel, it would be impossible to ground a morality on it. For Havel the ground of reality is the primordial experience of a Being which is a thing. A thing which surrounds and encompasses his being and grounds his

³⁵ Pontusso, *Václav Havel*, 26.

experience of an I in a moral world. This is an existential theme, however this is an existentialism unlike the existentialism of Sartre, where the no-thing-ness of Being gives rise to the ought to be, in the sense that the ought to be is the result of the self deciding to act in freedom. For Havel, we are free to act to realise Being. However, to claim that Havel's exploration of the character of Being in any way describes Being is to miss the intentional ambiguity in his description of Being. Pontusso gets it right when he claims that Havel is more interested in the phenomenological reality of the spiritual dimension of the political.³⁶ However, I contend that it is a focus on the concrete phenomenological reality that is the hallmark of Havel's critique of modernity, and that needs to be the prime focus in appraising Havel's thought. The existential themes of Havel's philosophy will be further elaborated in Chapter Five. The point was made early in Havel scholarship by Stanislaw Baranczak, who argued that in Havel's plays the focus is always on a concrete reality.³⁷ Baranczak's point is that in order to explain 'man' Havel always situates man in his thrown state, in the concrete world of lived experience. He cites the character of Mephistopheles from Havel's *Temptation*, who is afflicted with smelly feet, as an example of Havel's grounding of his characters. In this chapter I will give outline to the concrete political philosophy inherent in Havel's thought that distances him from Heidegger.

The political focus in Havel's writings is clear; hence the lack of clarity on what exactly constitutes Being is not as problematic as it might first appear. When considering the concept of Being in both Heidegger's and Havel's works, it becomes clear that their thought is at loggerheads. Heidegger is interested in describing the essence of Being itself, while Havel is more interested in describing the relationship between Being and

³⁶ Ibid 35.

³⁷ Stanislaw Baranczak "All the President's Plays" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, ed. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999) 53-54.

beings. This is clearest in Havel's long essay, *The Power of the Powerless*. The focus of this essay is not about uncovering the ground of Being, but analysing the mechanics of power within an ideology. Havel in this work describes political ideology as a socially and historically manufactured construct. Its power is illusory and is only made legitimate when citizens actively acknowledge the ideology as real. Havel claims that if one is responsible to Being and not to an ideology, then one is living in the truth. A socially created political system such as the post-totalitarian system creates and invades life with a variety of ideological machinations that manufacture fear and consent from the citizens.³⁸ When the ideological component of the political system is adhered to by beings, responsibility towards Being is replaced with responsibility towards an ideology.

The aim of *The Power of the Powerless* is to explicate the utility of this relationship between Being and beings in a political way. This theme is carried on occasionally and somewhat more cryptically in *Letters to Olga* and in Havel's open letters, speeches and as far back as his plays; however, it must be noted that not all of Havel's writings offer a coherent and consistent philosophy. When Havel offers an analysis of the relationship of beings to Being his philosophy is pragmatic and morally rich. When he diverges from this Havel has a tendency to obfuscate. By way of an explanation of this confusion I point to Havel's descriptions of Being. In describing Being Havel uses many religious phrases. Chapter 2 deals specifically with religion in Havel's work, but here I point to the mystical description of Being. This character is perfectly portrayed in the passage from letter 140 of *Letters to Olga* quoted above. I think writing that Being is "soft" and "blurred" and coloured differently in each semantic depiction reveals an inherent disregard for the

38 This is Havel's own term to describe the socialist system in control of Czechoslovakia while he composed the essay. He uses the term post-totalitarian because he finds many fundamental differences between smaller totalitarian regimes and the much more complex system that was then in effect. Havel uses the term post-totalitarian to describe the condition of late socialism. He describes, in *The Power of the Powerless*, a difference between the traditional notion of totalitarianism and the incorporeal entity that exerts power under late socialism. For Havel, Stalin embodied a totalitarian leader, however under late socialism, the socialist ideology, was propounded by a series of social checks and balances which did not rely on the organisation of society by a figure head. That is that a post-totalitarian system's power structure is created by the entire society. See note #5.

beeline that Heidegger made for an uncovered Being. Havel is happy to leave Being concealed, and let it be revealed through responsible political action.

It is my contention that Havel is not specifically a religious thinker; however, due to deliberate ambiguities in Havel's writings I cannot make such a pronouncement with any real certainty, nor can those writers who claim that Havel's thought is best understood as Christian thought advance their interpretation with any real certainty. This is the theme of the following chapter; but I draw attention here to a quote from Edward Ericson Jr's article 'Solzhenstein, Havel, and the Twenty-First Century'; "If [Havel] doesn't say everything a Christian might, he doesn't necessarily say anything at odds with a Christian critique."³⁹ In these kinds of passages Havel has a tendency to be vague. He is much less so when writing about politics. This is important because Havel's philosophy rests on the significance of Being as a fundamental ontological given, and despite his inability to clearly describe Being, he still offers a meaningful and clear political philosophy. Havel's philosophy needs to be considered against that of his mentor Jan Patočka, who attempts to philosophise after Heidegger and after the 'death of metaphysics.' I agree with Peter Vardy, who in *What is Truth?* argues that Havel's position is that truth is best revealed by the falsity of ideological positions, in other words the deliberate exclusions of parts of life that are against an ideology reveal that there is an outside of power relations, that truth is not relative.⁴⁰ The concern for Havel then is how to achieve this outsider perspective so that moral considerations of acting within an ideology are more easily discerned. This is not a Heideggerian philosophy because the basic concern expressed here is for the relationships between beings, not an attempt to reveal Being as such.⁴¹

39 Edward Ericson Jr, "Solzhenstein, Havel and the Twenty-First Century" *Modern Age* 99, Iss 1 (1999): 4.

40 Peter Vardy *What is Truth?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), 157.

41 The position I am advocating is similar to that found in John Glasser's short summary of Havel's philosophy in his book length study of the rise of civil society in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, *Living Within the Truth*. Glasser focuses purely on the political dissent in Havel's writings.

Heidegger, Havel and Technology

It is, however, undeniable that Heidegger's critique of modernity is prominent in Havel's perspective. Both Havel and Heidegger share a common concern about modern technology and its alienating effect in contemporary society.⁴² Heidegger's dislike of modern technological living is most clearly summed up in the famous *Der Spiegel* Interview.⁴³

Heidegger: ... I say we have no path that corresponds to the essence of technology as of yet.

Spiegel: One could naively object: What do we have to come to terms with here? Everything functions. More and more electric power plants are being built. Production is flourishing. People in highly technological parts of the earth are well provided for. We live in prosperity. What is really missing here?

Heidegger: Everything Functions. That is exactly what is uncanny. Everything functions and the functioning drives us further and further to more functioning, and technology tears people away and uproots them from the earth more and more. I don't know if you are scared; I was certainly scared when I recently saw the photographs of the earth taken from the moon. We don't need an atom bomb at all; the uprooting of human beings is already

See John Glasser, *Living Within Truth* (United States: Xlibris Corporation, 2005).

Another important advocating a purely political interpretation is Richard Rorty's essay 'The End of Leninism, Havel and Social Hope.' This essay will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

See Richard Rorty, "The End of Leninism, Havel and Social Hope" in *Truth and Progress*; Philosophical Papers, Volume 3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

42 Tucker, "Havel's Heideggerianism," 70.

43 Martin Heidegger, Interview by Der Spiegel, *Der Spiegel*, September 23, 1966. Trans by Maria Alter & John Caputo <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~other1/Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf> (accessed on May 27, 2007)

taking place. We only have purely technological conditions left. It is no longer an earth on which human beings live today.⁴⁴

Heidegger believes that there is something authentically human in the experience of tradition and history that is not found in the experience of technological living. By technological living I am referring to an ideology of sorts which is how Heidegger, and Havel, sees the condition of modernity. It is ideological in the sense that technology does not give a total perspective to life; it is a particular view, not the only view, yet advances itself as a total view. Heidegger expresses a fear that technology might uproot man from the world through space exploration.⁴⁵ Space exploration is only an example of the alienating effect of technology, however. For Heidegger, technology uproots us from our past and traditions. This uprooting has the effect of turning man into a technological being, a functional artefact. The example of space exploration is apt because Heidegger is able to conjure an image of man leaving the world, which is exactly what is conceptually problematic about technology for him. In the same interview Heidegger claims that everything essential and great has occurred as a result of humans being rooted in a particular place and engaging with particular traditions.⁴⁶ For Heidegger, technology and technological living rapidly increase the pace at which life is running away from the rooted and traditional modes of living. The instigation of a space program leaves Heidegger to muse on humanity's eventual abandonment of planet earth. The analogical significance of human beings dwelling on another planet is clearly not lost on Heidegger. That technology will possibly eventually undo the physical and not merely

⁴⁴ Ibid 10.

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, in the prologue to her work *The Human Condition*, gives a nuanced response to the space shuttle's orbit. She is wary of the sense of relief of man escaping from our imprisonment on the earth for the first time.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

existential relationship between a human being and the earth reveals the destructive nature of technology.

After postulating the dire consequences that await humanity upon adopting a technological life that is different from the essence of humanity (a life rooted in tradition and history); Heidegger is then asked by the interviewer about a possible role for philosophy in attempting to change the bearing of humanity from the destructive road that Heidegger has described to a more positive life. Heidegger's answer is not at all comforting. In fact when asked directly, what role philosophy, or the philosopher has in improving the situation of humanity, Heidegger responds with the statement that philosophy will not be able to bring about a direct change of the present state of the world leading to a famous pronouncement, "only a god can still save us." Heidegger contends and then clarifies that preparations for a change in thought, through thinking and poetry, are all that can be done in the face of a rapidly instrumentalising technological world. Heidegger sees his philosophy as thinking about the history of western philosophy to find the origin of technological thinking, to attempt to find its counter, thinking as *poesis*. One of the interviewers quizzed Heidegger for clarification, asking:

Because we do not live three hundred years from now, but here and now, we are denied silence. We politicians, semi politicians, citizens, journalists, et cetra, we constantly have to make some sort of decision or other. We must adapt ourselves to the system under which we live, must try to change it, must watch for the narrow door to reform and for the narrower door to

revolution. We expect help from the philosopher, even if, of course, only indirect help, help in roundabout ways. And now we hear: I cannot help you.⁴⁷

Heidegger responds, "I cannot." Heidegger, in claiming that "only a god can still save us," is not advocating a return to a particular world religion. He claims in the same interview that the answer to the world's technological problem does not lie in replacing or substituting technological life for Zen Buddhism or something like that. Instead any change must come from the source of the technological world - the place of its origin. The interviewer asks if western theologians are perhaps thinkers who possess the answer to Heidegger's technological crisis, to which Heidegger responds that they are different kinds of thinkers than philosophers. Western philosophy, or more specifically western metaphysics, ends for Heidegger with Nietzsche. For the theologian, utilising western metaphysics occludes the possibility of experiencing fundamental characteristics of the technological age. For Heidegger, the thinking of theology is unable to understanding the technological world. Scientific thinking has completely replaced metaphysical thinking. Hence Heidegger sees his philosophy as an attempt to think back, through the history of philosophy, to find the origins of technological thinking.

Heidegger's deep dissatisfaction with scientific thinking in an increasingly technological society led him to speculate in his essay *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* that:

The sciences are now taking over as their own task what philosophy in the course of its history tried to present in certain places, and even there only

⁴⁷ Ibid

inadequately, that is, the ontologies of the various regions of beings (nature, history, law, art).⁴⁸

That a 'scientific' philosophy would attempt to provide answers to the question of Being, in Heidegger's eyes, points to a rapid acceptance of nihilism. Heidegger asserts that "Being is no thing" hence any attempt to describe Being in 'scientific' terms as some sort of substance is nihilistic. In his essay *What is Metaphysics?*, Heidegger explains the nihilistic ground of the sciences:

The special relation science sustains to the world and the attitude of man that guides it can of course be fully grasped only when we see and comprehend what happens in the relation to the world so attained. Man – one being among others – "pursues science." In this "pursuit" nothing less transpires than the irruption by one being called "man" into the whole of beings, indeed in such a way that in and through this interruption beings break open and show what they are and how they are. The interruption that breaks open, in its way, helps beings above all to themselves.⁴⁹

Heidegger is claiming that sciences only reveal the contents and nature of being and things. When man pursues science, man is thinking about the nature of beings. The question of Being is not able to be addressed by the sciences as Being is fundamentally a no-thing. That is it is not *ontic* in nature. By directing thought towards things, science has directed thought away from Being. Heidegger claims that the question of Being has

48 Martin Heidegger "End of Philosophy" in *Basic Writings*, trans David Krell, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 435.

49 Martin Heidegger "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings*, trans David Krell, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 95.

been forgotten. There is thinking occurring in science; however according to Heidegger when science announces the scope of its inquiry, beings are to be examined and nothing else.⁵⁰ Heidegger continues to assert that this “nothing else” that science mentions is important, for, when you assert that beings and nothing else shall be examined you are conceding the existence of nothing. For Heidegger, science asserts that this nothing is “an outrage or a phantasm” and subsequently the question of nothing is left un-investigated by science.⁵¹ “Science wants to know nothing of the nothing.”⁵² This is problematic for Heidegger because when science delineates the scope of its inquiry it necessarily calls the nothing into focus in order to do so.⁵³ Heidegger writes that science “has recourse to what it rejects.”⁵⁴ Havel would argue (and this can be read as being in agreement with Heidegger) that science, or to be more accurate scientism, is ideological. It is pulling all aspects of life into itself and imposing a particular view of how things are in all discourse.

With our contemporary existence being determined by science, for Heidegger, contemporary existence is not investigating one of the most important questions that perpetually confront us. This nothing that allows beings to be considered as things, is Being. Being for Heidegger is a nothing. It is the nothing that surrounds all other investigations. Modern science, for Heidegger, directs thinking towards beings. It takes

⁵⁰ Ibid 95.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid 96.

⁵³ It should be noted that recent developments in science are not as open to Heidegger’s criticism as the more positivistic strand that Heidegger was criticising. The further science explores the composition of the universe and the atom, the more and more startling is the discovery that the universe is comprised of quite a lot of nothingness. Jim Holt, author of *Why Does the World Exist* makes a coherent argument for rejecting the premise that the world is comprised of things. For Holt, the better idea is that the world is, in essence, the flux of pure information, and is therefore substanceless. For Holt, the question ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ is the wrong question. Branches of contemporary science are quite comfortable with the idea of nothingness.

See Jim Holt, *Why Does the World Exist*, (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

⁵⁴ Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics’, 96

the Cartesian cogito as the source of existence and moves from this to an investigation of the world of things. Against this view, Heidegger sees thinking as the pathway to Being. Being is very different from the overly humanistic Cartesian cogito. In *The Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger writes “[t]hinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man.”⁵⁵ Thinking accomplishes the revealing of Being when it escapes from the technical connotations that Plato and Aristotle gave it and that have been carried down through the history of western philosophy. Heidegger writes that if we want to experience the more poetic and true essence of thinking then a technical interpretation of the world must be abandoned.

In *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger writes,

The rigor of thinking in contrast to that of the sciences, does not consist merely in an artificial, that is, technical-theoretical exactness of concepts. It lies in the fact that speaking remains purely in the element of Being and lets the simplicity of its manifold dimensions rule.⁵⁶

Describing Being in technical (scientific) terms is impossible. Being is rather intuited through thinking. Speaking, in its simplest form is giving oral expression to thought. Language then for Heidegger is the vehicle through which Being is revealed. Earlier in the letter he writes that “language is the house of Being.” Giving a scientific dimension to language, for Heidegger, reduces language to a practically orientated tool that expresses subjectivity’s relationship to beings rather than realising its full potential and accomplishing a revelation of our relationship to Being. On this point Havel and

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger “Letter on Humanism” in *Basic Writings*, trans David Krell, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 217.

⁵⁶ Ibid 219.

Heidegger are in agreement. A large part of the ambiguity and inexactness of Havel's description of Being lies in the fact that to talk of Being is to allude to the sheer fact of existence, something of which there can be no description. One cannot describe with accurate detail the fact that there is something.

A useful term to introduce here is nihilism. Thinking as *techne* is nihilistic and a society that is based on a technological identification presents signs of nihilism.

Heidegger borrows the term from Nietzsche who used it to describe the decadent path that thought had taken after Plato's influence had shaped Christian morality, and with that the whole future direction of western history. Heidegger similarly sees the turn in philosophy after Plato as a nihilistic turn. Heidegger, unlike Nietzsche, is not interested in morality and its corrupt and dishonest origin. Instead Heidegger sees reframing of thinking as a technical tool as nihilistic. It is symptomatic of what he terms the end of thinking.⁵⁷

When thinking comes to an end by slipping out of its element it replaces this loss by procuring a validity for itself as a *techne*, as an instrument of education and therefore as a classroom matter and later a cultural concern. By and by philosophy becomes a technique for explaining from highest causes. One no longer thinks; one occupies oneself with "philosophy."⁵⁸

Heidegger is being critical of philosophy. Philosophy, in an attempt to justify its existence, has presented itself as a science which for Heidegger means that thought has ended. There is no true thinking when thought concerns beings. Thinking in its purest form is thinking of Being. On this point it is possible to differentiate Havel and Heidegger. For

⁵⁷ Heidegger, "End of Thinking" 220.

⁵⁸ Ibid 221.

Heidegger thinking as poesis is the most important idea in his later writing. Thinking as poesis, for Heidegger, is thinking in a way that brings forth truth. Thinking is not technical thinking but rather a “letting happen” of truth.⁵⁹ In other words, poetry, or the poesis of the poem, lets an unconcealing of a being happen, revealing the Being of the being.

He displays a strong affiliation with romanticism and the attempt to escape from society towards pure existence. The romantic in Heidegger sees thinking as a task to take us away from the world of things towards Being itself. He is perhaps advocating a turning away from a world of events and decisions to employ poetry as an access to Being. This is quite a romantic position. Poetic language, for Heidegger, reveals the artist through the art, and thereby transcends both in that revealing. Heidegger reminds me here of Keats, in ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’ longing for a draft of nature’s wine which will fuse his soul with the forests, and in doing so escape the dull world of men.⁶⁰ As Walter Kaufmann suggests, for Heidegger, due to the essential alienation of common sense from the source of our being, we must rely on poetic creations like those of Hölderlin to supply us with a thinking that recalls Being rather than represents it.⁶¹ It is far beyond

59 Martin Heidegger “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Basic Writings*, trans David Krell, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 197.

60 John Keats Ode to a Nightingale. The exact lines are from the second stanza and are as follows,

O for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country-green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South!
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

61 Walter Kaufmann Existentialism, *From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 39.

the scope of this thesis to explain the Romantic elements of Heidegger's thought; however the point needs to be made that perhaps Heidegger's lack of enthusiasm for confronting the urgent practical tasks of human society is explainable by his affiliation with romantic thinkers. This is significant because Havel is not an avid reader of the romantics. Havel's literary taste runs more to modern writers such as Kafka. There might be a point to be made about the difference in focus between the two thinkers and their literary interests. The modernist's direction towards the demands of society is strong in Havel and the romantic direction towards nature is strong in Heidegger.

Thinking for Heidegger, in its purest form, thinks Being, and is the way to engender a change in the nihilistic path of humanity. In the interview that Heidegger gives to *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger is continually pressed for an opinion about whether or not he believes in a political system that can enhance good political life. Heidegger continually maintains that he does not believe in any currently existing political system.⁶² It is probable that Heidegger is trying to remove the associations in his past with the national socialist movement that had haunted his later career. Yet there is also something deeper in Heidegger's denial of utility in political systems. The fact is that Heidegger's philosophy is not a political philosophy. Pure thinking and politics, for Heidegger, are completely separated. Politics, for Heidegger, is a part of what he calls the "fallenness into beings" and thinking of Being is an emancipation from this fallenness. In the *Der Spiegel* interview, when asked about which political system is most appropriate for our times, Heidegger responds,

That I don't see. But I do see a decisive question here. First we would have to clarify what you mean by "appropriate to our time," what time means here. It

⁶² Heidegger "Der Spiegel" 10.

is even more important to ask whether appropriateness to our time is the measure for the “inner truth” of human actions, or whether “thinking and writing poetry” [Denken und Dichten], despite all censure of this phrase, are not the actions that most provide us with a measure.⁶³

I think the above passage highlights the fact that Heidegger is not a political thinker. Yet the fact remains that Heidegger was an active member of the Nazi party. This political involvement might hint at a correlation between Heidegger’s philosophy and his political perspectives. Did he believe that his philosophy, acted out politically, could be an escape from a technological disintegration of humanity? It is not the intention of this thesis to offer a definitive reading of Heidegger’s philosophy and politics. There have been numerous accounts of his Nazism and its relation to his philosophy. I argue that his involvement in National Socialism, shows Heidegger to be politically naive. It is a fair suggestion that after the end of World War Two Heidegger became politically disengaged. During the war, Heidegger was delivering lectures on romantic poetry, and, by his own admission, he was not favoured by the party during the war years.⁶⁴ Clearly the greater part of Heidegger’s career as a philosopher is disengaged with fundamental questions of politics.

Leslie Paul Thiele asserts that despite Heidegger’s personal distance from politics, his philosophy, and its concern for freedom, represent a contribution to political thought.

During his politically active career as rector of Freiburg University under the Nazi regime, Heidegger adopted a positive concept of liberty. In line with Nazi ideology, which he fervently propagated during his brief

⁶³ Ibid 10

⁶⁴ Ibid 6

tenure, Heidegger situates the self within a Volk that circumscribes and defines its identity.⁶⁵

Thiele notes that this belief in positive liberty, and a correlated enthusiasm for the strict laws of National Socialism, is not followed up by Heidegger after resigning his rectorship in 1934. This turn away from positive liberty, Thiele asserts is replaced by a new conception of freedom in Heidegger's thought. Freedom, for Heidegger, is freedom to participate in the revealing of the what-is-as-such.⁶⁶ As a practical political philosophy, this conception of freedom is lacking substance and plausibility. I also think it is a mistake to conflate enthusiasm for a particular political ideology in a particular place and time with a strong interest in political philosophy. By Heidegger's own admission, in National Socialism, the same tendency of technology to promote nihilism is found.⁶⁷ In one of the few instances where Heidegger discussed the War, Heidegger compares the death camps to instrumentalising reason. This is pointed out by George Pattison who presents some justification for the view that Heidegger's membership of the party did not extend to support for the 'Final Solution'. Pattison refers to Heidegger's lecture 'The Enframing' where Heidegger mentions death camps in an analogy with industrial production. Heidegger writes, "Agriculture is now a motorised food-industry – in essence the same as the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs"⁶⁸ For Pattison, and I agree with him, this is evidence that Heidegger equates the holocaust to his distrust of technological life.

65 Leslie Thiele "Heidegger on Freedom" *The American Political Science Review*, 88, No 2, (1994): 281.

66 Ibid 282.

67 Thomas Iain writing on Heidegger's aesthetics in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* finds in Heidegger's 'The Age of the World Picture' a subtle critique of the National Socialist worldview.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy "Heidegger's Aesthetics" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/> (accessed 26 May 2008).

68 George Pattison, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger* (Kentucky: Routledge, 2000), 28

The holocaust had industrialised death. For Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, death is an experience peculiar to Dasein. An individual is able to accept their death. The technological interpretation of death that is realised by the holocaust is censured by Heidegger.

I do not deny that other thinkers have gleaned a political angle out of a Heideggerian perspective – I simply assert that Heideggerian concern for the technological impoverishment of the contemporary lifeworld is not yet a political philosophy: it fails to deal with the fundamental problems of social and political living. When his historical situation was in most need of political debate, Heidegger spoke about poetry. Havel's political philosophy is much richer in a political sense because of its concern for practicality. This richness, I will argue in chapters seven and eight, is a result of the liberal standpoint of Havel.

For Havel, the political realm is the realm from which change happens. The problems of the technological world are addressed and a reprieve is offered to humanity via the political philosophy propounded in his work. There are clear differences between Havel's and Heidegger's political projects that are much greater than the shared nomenclature might suggest. Whereas Heidegger prefers a kind of meditative philosophy that can think Being without the taint of western metaphysics or science, Havel believes that real action motivated by a concern for Being can bring about a political change that can overcome the problems that humanity faces currently.

Heidegger and Havel have a similar, though not equal, attitude to technology. Havel does not specify, as Heidegger does, that there is an essence of technology that runs divergent to the essence of Being. However Havel, like Heidegger, is worried about an increasingly technological world and its effect on one's relationship to Being. In Letter 118 in *Letters to Olga* Havel writes,

Not long ago, while watching a report on cows on the television news, I realised that the cow is no longer an animal: it is a machine that has an “input” (grain feeds) and an “output” (milk). It has its own production plans and its own operator whose job is the same as the job of the entire economy today: to increase output while decreasing input. The cow serves us quite efficiently, really, but at the cost of no longer being a cow, in the same way that northern Bohemia is an important source of fuel (that is, if an admixture of brown coal and clay can be called fuel) at the cost of ceasing to be our homeland and becoming something between the surface of the moon and our homeland.⁶⁹

The modern world is detrimentally technological and economical in Havel’s eyes. Organic matter is viewed as an economic resource which technology exploits. Havel thinks that pride and historical identity have become commodities. Heidegger’s framing of the problem in terms of the essence of technology is not present in the above example. In analysing the source of this shift in the identity of nature (of beings), Havel claims the dire situation of the world today is the result of a crisis in the experience of our absolute horizon.⁷⁰

The notion of horizons is borrowed from Patočka and will be further elaborated on in chapters three and four. For Havel, experience can be divided into horizons of experience. There is the concrete horizon, which is the totality of physical experience, and then there are conceptual horizons in which one exists as well. For example, I might not be in Syria at this present moment, but I can learn about a struggle for democratic reform and feel some sympathy for that struggle. In this instance I am living in the

⁶⁹ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 293

⁷⁰ Ibid

horizon of Syrian politics, or as Havel would say, the horizon of the world, rather than my immediate space. Havel, whilst in prison, compares horizons to walls. The concrete horizon's walls conceal the higher horizon of Being, the authentic, unrepresented horizon.⁷¹ "Something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success."⁷² The world that gives the family, the country, its history and customs, the success and failures is a world that is experienced in a host of ways by different humans. The shared experience of the world creates the need for responsibility. As there will be other humans in the future, it is my responsibility to leave a decent world for them to live in; as there are humans in Myanmar living under extreme oppression, it is my responsibility to push the ruling regime for change if I can.

For Havel, being rooted in the intellectual and spiritual structures that define twentieth century living, is a disability when it comes to understanding or considering what Havel calls the horizon of Being. That is modern life fails to refer to, or recognise Being. Clearly there is a parallel that can be drawn to Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger's explanation of the essence of technology, and its essential difference to the essence of Being is, however, missing from Havel's explanation. In Havel there is a greater focus on the concrete experience of everydayness. This is not disadvantageous. In fact there is great utility in Havel's story about watching the cows on television. He recognises a problem with modern living and offers an explanation for it. Modern life is not up to the task of 'living in truth' because regrettably it has lost the horizon of Being. However rather than dwelling on the taxonomy of that loss, as Heidegger does, Havel wants to make a difference. Heidegger's sense of a loss of hope for salvation is not found in the account of Havel. Havel wants to rescue humanity and conceives of this as a practical task.

⁷¹ Ibid, 122.

⁷² Václav Havel quoted by Lewis Lapham in Goetz-Stankiewicz & Carey (ed), *Critical Essays on Václav Havel* 94.

At the end of letter 118 Havel writes,

If I consider the problem as that which the world is turning me into – that is, as a tiny screw in a giant machine, deprived of human identity – then there is really nothing I can do. Obviously I cannot put a stop to the destruction of the globe, the growing stupidity of nations and the production of new thermonuclear bombs. If, however, I consider it as that which each of us originally is, or rather what each of us – irrespective of the state of the world – has the basic potential to become, which is to say an, autonomous human being, capable of acting responsibly to and for the world, then of course there is a great deal I can do.

For example I can try to behave in a way I think is proper, a way I am convinced everyone should behave – that is responsibly.⁷³

It seems as though Havel is speaking directly to Heidegger. A major point of difference between the two thinkers has emerged in this passage through the practical orientation of Havel's thought. If Havel is responsible for himself, for recovering his sense of Being, by living in truth, then Havel has made progress. If others do the same then there will be an existential revolution of sorts. Here the problems announced in the story of the cows are overcome through individuals being responsible to and for their Being. Rather than claiming that the problem humanity faces is too large and too entrenched in history to be solved, Havel reduces the problem to the individual as a representative of humanity, that is, to a person not constituting the whole of humanity, and consequently the problem becomes much smaller and manageable.

⁷³ Ibid, 293.

Havel takes from Heidegger the idea that there is a tendency for the self to lose itself through interaction with the Other, as Dasein identifies with the 'They'. There is an illustrative example of Havel's concern for the loss of the self in his play 'The Garden Party,'⁷⁴ which centres on the adventures of young Hugo Pludek as he ventures out into the world of work. His parents, who have already worked, are identity-less, consumed by a jumble of clichés which are their only expression. In the opening scene the family of the protagonist are anxiously awaiting a very important visitor who will guide their son in his future. Despite the eagerness of their vigil, when the mother asks "what if he doesn't come" the father responds "if he doesn't come then somebody else will." For Havel, this is a moral problem, because, as the 'I' is subsumed in the 'they', the very idea of personal responsibility is lost – one person is as good as another. This is a loss of the moral dimension of society. There is, in 'The Garden Party,' a somewhat Heideggerian critique of the alienating effect of technology. However the concern for the loss of the moral is equally important if one is to understand Havel's position, this is something that has been largely overlooked scholarship on Havel.

The Heideggerian analysis of alienation in modernity is, for Aviezer Tucker, the fundamental core of Havel's thought.⁷⁵ This is not sufficient for a complete analysis of Havel's position. Tucker is critical that it seems that in Havel's analysis, life outside of post-totalitarian conditions is as alienating as life under post-totalitarian conditions. Tucker argues that Havel's concern for politics both within and outside post-totalitarian life is lacking.⁷⁶ This is a flawed position on Tucker's part. The central aim of this thesis is to explain Havel's philosophy as having a twenty-first century relevance. Tucker's claim

⁷⁴ This is the most popular of Havel's plays and as Pontusso explains, deals with the workings of bureaucracy. The central point to keep in mind about this play is that the language of the characters on stage is vague and general. That is, they do not address any specific reality, but instead speak in general clichés. For a full review of the play's content, see Pontusso *Václav Havel*, 92-94.

⁷⁵ Tucker *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 140-142.

⁷⁶ Ibid 142.

that Havel's philosophy is a naive adoption of Heidegger's without critical analysis requires careful response. In later chapters I will be employing Havel's philosophy to political problems addressed by other contemporary political thinkers like Jurgen Habermas, Chantal Mouffe, and John Rawls amongst others, and in each analysis I aim to present Havel's work as having relevance outside of the conditions of late socialism in which most of his writing was composed. In Chapter 7 I make it explicit that as soon as the velvet revolution had overthrown the communist regime, Havel is straight away concerned with increasing the horizon of political involvement in Czechoslovakia by applying for NATO membership and lobbying the U.N. for greater involvement in world affairs. This concern comes from recognition on Havel's part of a problem of modernity that is not at all specific to socialism. There is some enduring truth to Havel's insistence that life, in what he readily calls the post-modern world, is alienating.

The loss of morality that comes with the alienating effects of modernity is a far stronger part of Havel's analysis than the Heideggerian core that Tucker critiques. The emphasis on responsibility in a political sphere is of paramount importance to Havel's thought. Pontusso is more correct to focus on Havel's understanding of a meaning in life rooted in the everyday.⁷⁷ For Havel, Pontusso writes⁷⁸, since the world contains structure and order, from culture, history, customs etc, there is nothing wrong with feeling authentic when engaging in everyday practices. I would go one step further and say that for Havel, life is meaningful when one lives in this concrete world of experience in a responsible way; that is, in a way which promotes individual self-fulfilment through a liberal understanding of the self. Havel's liberalism is the focus of a following chapter, but I want to suggest here that for Havel, the individual is charged with pursuing their

⁷⁷ Pontusso, *Václav Havel*, 35.

⁷⁸ Pontusso is analysing 'Letter 76' from *Letters to Olga*, where Havel writes about the "order of Being" which is the meaningful world of customs, culture, aesthetics in which human beings are 'thrown.' 173.

own unique understanding of happiness that is worked out in an existing political structure. This is best set out through an example.

Havel, in his essay *The Power of the Powerless*, tells the famous story about the greengrocer placing a sign in his window proclaiming 'Workers of the World unite!'⁷⁹

Havel questions the greengrocer's motives in placing the sign in his window:

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and the carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it had been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because it is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble .⁸⁰

The world that the greengrocer engages in, that is actually lives in, involves a set of ritualistic practices that maintain his existence in the social world. Havel intended this story to be a critique of socialist governance; however the moral reaches much further than this. The actions of the greengrocer, whether they are the performance of his job (placing of carrots and onions), or performing his social duty (placing the placard), for Havel represent those of a person in a thrown state of Being. It is the job and the social structure in which he live, which determine or coerce action from the greengrocer, and, also, in a sense determine his identity in the world. As a greengrocer it is natural to place onions and the carrots in a window, however, as a greengrocer there is something a little bit odd about placing a socialist slogan.

⁷⁹ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, (New York: M.E.Sharpe, 1985), 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 27.

What is it that compels the greengrocer to place the slogan in his window? Havel writes that it is fear. Havel writes that the placing of the slogan is “one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life ‘in harmony with society’, as they say.”⁸¹ The combined placing of slogans by all citizens affirms an ideology. What Havel calls “the aims of life” are put aside in order to live in harmony with ideology. Life within the system, for Havel, is life within a lie, as one’s actions are being determined by one’s desire to not upset a system rather than being determined by a desire to live an authentic life. The totalitarian system is created and affirmed through the greengrocer’s actions. He shares the guilt, along with all of the other participating citizens, in making normal the practice of affirming the totalitarian system. The identity of the greengrocer is tied in with his participation in the ideology’s rituals and practices. Havel believes in an authentic existence which is outside and apart from ideology. Without having to have recourse to a metaphysical principle, Havel can assert that through a critical examination of one’s actions and a refusal to act to the dictates of the ideology, one can be authentic to oneself. That behaviour must change to suit and propound an ideology, for Havel evidences the authenticity of life outside of the ideology. It is not enough to put up the sign and then complain to one’s friends about a corrupt system; this behaviour still asserts the dominance of the ideology. Despite the criticism, the system still is being affirmed and recognised. When all one does is complain about how bad their life is, or how oppressed they are, the system that one complains about remains, still dictating behaviour and controlling life. For Havel the dissident denies the authority of the ideology by refusing to behave as the system dictates. and in effect dissident denies the ideology. By choosing to not place the sign, the greengrocer begins to ‘live in the truth’.

⁸¹ Ibid 28.

‘Living in truth’ is the key maxim of Havel’s writings. It is the impetus behind his plays, it is the concern of his dissent, and it is foremost in his concerns as President. Living in truth is living outside of the coercions of ideology; that is being open to all possible appearances rather than focusing on a single mode of appearance. Being open to life’s plurality is living in truth. In later chapters I will explain living in truth as a kind of Socratic inquiry, an inquiring into the nature of things to reveal their mendacity rather than living in a set or prescribed way. Living in truth is living responsibly towards Being. James Sire describes living in truth as listening to the call of conscience, as the call to Being.⁸² This is only half right. Sire intends to show Havel to be a Christian thinker and so it is natural for him to limit living in truth to a Christian conscience. Living in truth is better conceived of as a critical activity and framing this activity as listening to the call of conscience tends to obscure this. By living in truth, through rational inquiry, a false ritual that one participates in can be revealed as false, endowing one with the responsibility to not comply with that ritual. This is a more complex conception of conscience than Sire admits.

It is clear that living in truth is a moral philosophy that deals with practical political actions, consequently the similarity of Havel’s analysis of modernity with Heidegger’s does not suffice to understand Havel’s philosophy. Heidegger by his own admission, is not concerned with prescribing a political philosophy for acting to counter the nihilism inherent in modernity, instead his focus is on thinking the nothing that modernity excludes in its acceptance as scientific instrumentality as the only mode of thinking. Havel on the other hand does see the same alienating effects of modernity; however he sees his task as generating a practical solution to halting the spread of nihilism. This

⁸² Sire *Václav Havel* 67.

separation will be better worked out through a more specific discussion of Havel's and Heidegger's conception of the political significance of art.

The Political Significance of Art

In this section I discuss the political significance of art in the philosophy of Heidegger and Havel. More specifically I will argue that art, for Heidegger is not politically significant, whereas for Havel art can contain a political significance which encourages or affects a life in truth. Timothy Garton Ash, in an article in the *New York Review* quotes Havel from a conference of writers involved with PEN an organisation which supports writers who are persecuted for political reasons. Havel, speaking to the collection of writers suggests that they,

..gradually begin to create something like a worldwide lobby, a special brotherhood or, if I may use the word, a somewhat conspirational mafia, whose aim is not just to write marvellous books or occasional manifestoes but to have an impact on politics and its human perceptions in a spirit of solidarity, and in a coordinated, deliberate way...⁸³

Havel is not offering a normative theory of art here; instead he is highlighting the effect that art can have on politics. For Havel, art is a means of living in truth, as through art one justifies one's position and one can bring the given into question. Josef Chytrý in his

⁸³ Václav Havel in Timothy Garton Ash in Goetz-Stankiewicz & Carey (ed), *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, 58.

work *Unis Vers Cythère* claims that Havel, in his work in the theatre had hoped to exploit the art of the theatre for political change.⁸⁴

Chytrý's explanation of Havel's position contrasts with Heidegger's attitude to art. For Heidegger, art does reveal truth. For Havel, art is best when it is political. This is because for Havel, art can inspire political action in an individual. As Paul Wilson, Havel's friend, translator, and former member of the band Plastic People of the Universe, notes "Havel's [priority in his writings] was to [inspire] action – not organised mass action, but to a revolt of individuals, a revolt of conscience."⁸⁵ Art, for Havel, can have a primary role in instigating this individual action. By exploring Heidegger's attitude to art we will see key differences between the two thinkers that will again reinforce the political focus of Havel's efforts in all forms of his writing.

In *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* Heidegger explains the completion of metaphysical thinking that is affected by the separation of the sciences from philosophy. Thinking, in so far as thinking brings Being into a clearing – in other words reveals Being – must be from a source that is neither metaphysical nor scientific. For Heidegger, politics speaks in the language of positivism, (by positivism Heidegger means a kind of scientism - that is a philosophy of beings only) and is therefore not the kind of preparatory thinking that he sees as necessary to escape humanity's current predicament. Science, as has already been discussed, is incapable of bringing Being into the clearing and for Heidegger, even philosophy is incapable of this task. The entirety of western metaphysics, for Heidegger (and Patočka after him), is written in Platonic language. Even when we consider then work of Nietzsche, who vehemently opposed Platonic metaphysics, we find that Nietzsche presented himself as an antithesis of Plato. In other words Nietzsche engaged in dialogue with Platonic philosophy; hence even

⁸⁴ Josef Chytrý, *Unis Vers Cythère*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 120.

⁸⁵ Paul Wilson "Václav Havel in Word and Deed" in Stankiewicz-Goetz & Carey, *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, 24.

Plato's opposite is still in essence a Platonic philosopher. Since Nietzsche represents the end of philosophy in Heidegger's mind, even the end of philosophy is intrinsically Platonic.

Philosophy has missed something vital. It has failed to be the revealer of Being, which for Heidegger is the proper task of philosophy. Heidegger writes, "Still, the clearing as such as it prevails through Being, through presence, remains un-thought in philosophy, although it is spoken about in philosophy's beginning."⁸⁶ Heidegger is referring to the concept of *alethia* - a Greek concept which means a bringing into a clearing, or a revealing. It is Parmenides who Heidegger quotes as the originator of this idea. It is vital to note that Heidegger is referring to a poem composed by Parmenides. *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* is a relatively late article written by Heidegger but it is not a new idea of his that the kind of thinking involved in poetry and meditation on poetry is the thinking that involves bringing Being into the clearing of unconcealment. Concerning *alethia*, or revealing, Heidegger writes that "[t]he meditative man is to experience the untrembling heart of unconcealment."⁸⁷ The idea of an untrembling heart of unconcealment is very confusing. Heidegger means that the meditative man has access to the experience Being - of the "the possible presencing of presence itself."⁸⁸ Poetry brings things into the clearing in which Being is discerned most easily and with the greatest level of achievement. Poetry and not political action bring Being into the light of the clearing.

In an earlier essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger explains the importance of artistic thinking for revealing Being.

⁸⁶ Martin Heidegger "The End of Philosophy" in *Basic Writings*, trans David Krell, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 444.

⁸⁷ Ibid 444.

⁸⁸ Ibid 445

Thus in the work it is truth, not merely something true, that is at work. The picture that shows peasant shoes, the poem that says the Roman fountain, do not simply make manifest what these isolated beings as such are – if indeed the manifest anything at all; rather, they make unconcealment as such happen in regard to beings as a whole.⁸⁹

What is missing from western philosophy is explicitly present in the functioning of art. It is in the making a work of art, and the consequent work of art that contains the notion of alethia – the clearing - that is so vital to Heidegger. Heidegger discusses Mayer's poem about a Roman fountain.⁹⁰ The poem says the roman fountain, it brings the fountain into thought. The poem discloses the being of the fountain in its Being. In the same way, the peasant shoes in Van Gough's painting reveal not only various facts about the shoes, that they are leather, and to be worn on the feet. Instead, as Hans Jaeger makes clear, "Van Gough's painting has revealed to us what the peasant shoes really and truly are."⁹¹ The shoes really and truly are a part of the peasant, of her rootedness to the world – they reveal truth as the world of the peasant. For Heidegger, this unconcealing is the role of art. Jaeger makes the point that for Heidegger "A work of art establishes truth by means of erecting a world." This point must be conditioned with the knowledge that art, in erecting a world, is still in the world. Truth for Heidegger is about a strife between what is revealed and what is concealed. Engaging with a work of art then is engaging this strife. Art then can be considered as a beginning of strife, because art brings the world into question. Heidegger writes, "[w]henver art happens... only then history begins or begins

⁸⁹ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 164

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Hans Jaeger "Heidegger and the Work of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 17, no 1 (1958), 61.

anew.”⁹² This is a very different conception of art than that of art as a representation of reality.

Another point of concern is that for Heidegger, any kind of aesthetics are nihilistic. Aesthetics is symptomatic of subjectivism. This is because aesthetics represents a human attempt to master our nature rather than let it happen. Aesthetics fundamentally presents the world as a subject - object dichotomy, as the subject applies the aesthetic to the art object and interprets it. This is a kind of technical thinking and is therefore erroneous for uncovering truth in art.

Havel seems to agree that art is about unconcealing.⁹³ However rather than escaping from the world to Being, Havel sees art as a way to reveal the mendacious and reversible trend of thought as techne. The concern of Havel’s plays is for drawing the audience attention to the absurdity of life under ideological conditions. This same concern is throughout his writings, but here I want to focus on his thoughts regarding art and art’s ability to reveal false political structures. Havel does not provide a clear discussion of aesthetics; however he does, on numerous occasions, write regarding the role of art in enriching civil society. In his speech ‘On Evasive Thinking’ Havel claims that a state that promotes pluralistic modes and genres of art is better because the totality of art is able to reflect the pluralistic condition of humanity?⁹⁴ This speech was made in opposition to state pressure to restrict the kind of literature being published. Similar themes are found in ‘Dear Dr Husak,’ an open letter published in 1975 to Gustav Husak who was then the General Secretary of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia.⁹⁵ Writing about the censorship of art and the promotion of a single art that promotes the values of the ruling ideology, Havel lambasts the party for restricting art in the public sphere. Havel is not

⁹² Ibid 71.

⁹³ I write, “seems to agree...” because Havel does not offer a clear or explicit aesthetic.

⁹⁴ Havel *Open Letters* 10-24.

⁹⁵ Ibid 50-83.

concerned about a restriction on the ability to reveal Being. Instead art for Havel, is a means through which a society, or a collection of people in a political space, become aware of themselves. Heidegger agrees with this role of art, but critiques the very idea of aesthetics as a symptom of subjectivism. Havel on the other hand wants to promote a range of competing aesthetics, to enlighten the concrete world of experience. Using art to reveal the truth of Being is not Havel's concern; his concern is for using art to instigate political action which will be responsible to Being.

Havel calls art an "organ through which a society becomes aware of itself."⁹⁶ With this in mind I wish to return to the above discussion of the political focus of Havel's work. I made the claim, which was an extension of Pontusso's analysis of Havel's thought, that Havel's philosophy is not concerned with the revelation of Being. Rather Being is taken for granted and Havel is concerned with the concrete phenomenological reality. Nothing makes this distinction between Heidegger's and Havel's thought clearer than Havel's claims about the role of art. Havel sees art as a means to explore the order of Being, the manifold ways in which individuals find meaning in their life, and the manifold ways in which a person can be responsible; he does not see art as a light to illuminate Being.

Other comments by Havel regarding art take this point further. In *Letters to Olga*, Havel writes about the use of symbols in art, that they should be pluralistic and have no fixed meaning.⁹⁷ This is because Havel sees art as something to reveal the pluralistic mesh of intertwined customs, beliefs, histories etc, which comprise a political reality. Art's meaning, for Havel, should compete in the political sphere in the same way that ideas should. Art then reflects the incomprehensible nature of Being. Havel, it appears to me, with his thoughts on art, is celebrating the ambiguity of Being. On the one hand Being is real and fundamental, and it orders the concrete world of experience. On the

⁹⁶ Havel *Open Letters* 68.

⁹⁷ Havel *Letters to Olga* 170.

other hand, that ordering is so pluralistic in nature as to make living responsibly in that order a constant Socratic task of uncovering misinterpretations of the order of Being. Where the meaning of art is subject to competition in a political sphere, it is intuitively obvious, for Havel, that a more responsible understanding of the order of Being is attainable, as intrinsically bad ideas are revealed as such through a coming to awareness that is embodied in the contemplation of art. This interpretation is in line with that of Jean Bethke Elshtain. Elshtain argues that for Havel, we can never be certain that our choices are in accord with authentic principle; hence we must perpetually open ourselves up for critique.⁹⁸

Allowing art to reflect society allows a contest of principles or a beginning of creative strife which aims at a getting closer to the order of Being through successive transformations of the existing concrete political order. This is the most important aspect of Havel's political philosophy in my view and Elshtain agrees. In her essay, 'A Man for This Season: Václav Havel on freedom and Responsibility'⁹⁹ Elshtain argues that Havel's important idea is a continuous "permanent agon" between tradition and transformation. This "agon" requires, I will argue later, a liberal political situation. However it is obvious that Havel's political philosophy is rooted in directing the concrete world of experience towards a responsible society, not directing concrete experience to a transcendent experience of Being.

Rooted in the intellectual and spiritual structures that define contemporary living is a disability when it comes to understanding or even aiming or looking at what Havel calls the horizon of Being. That is, modern life fails to refer or recognise Being. There is a great utility in Havel's story about watching the cows on television which was described above.

98 Jean Bethke Elshtain "A Man for this Season," *Perspectives on Political Science* 92, vol 21, iss 4, (1992): 208.

99 Ibid 208.

Havel recognises a problem with modern living and offers an explanation for it. Modern life is not up to the task of living in truth because regrettably it has lost the horizon of Being. Technology has taken away the impetus to belong to a specific order of being, and consequently the traditions which Elshtain says should be in contest with transformation, are not understood. However rather than dwelling on the taxonomy of that loss, as Heidegger does, Havel wants to make a difference. Heidegger's sense of a loss of hope for salvation is not found Havel. Havel wants to rescue humanity. Bringing Being into a clearing is not his task, rather he is interested in the uncovering responsibility to Being; in other words Havel asks what actions lead us to live in truth? At the end of letter 118 of *Letters to Olga*, which is quoted earlier in this chapter, Havel could be taken as speaking directly to Heidegger, or at last to someone who finds nihilism inevitable. A major difference between the two thinkers has emerged in this passage through the simplicity of Havel's thought. If Havel makes himself responsible for himself, for recovering his sense of Being, living in truth, then Havel has made progress. If others do the same then an existential revolution of sorts is realised where the problems of a technological society are overcome through individuals being responsible to their Being. Rather than claiming that the problem humanity faces is too large and too entrenched in history to be solved, Havel reduces the problem to the individual as a representative of humanity, not constituting the whole of humanity, and consequently the problem becomes much more manageable.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on a discussion of the differences between Havel and Heidegger's thought. Sire, Tucker and Pontusso are partially correct to cite the heavy influence of Heidegger on Havel; however Pontusso is more correct to locate the

divergence between the two regarding the nature of Being. Heidegger's Being as a nothing is not conducive to Havel's understanding of the moral dimension of Being. That is, Havel cannot conceive of Being as lacking a foundation because that would mean that there would be no foundation for moral responsible action. Instead, from its foundation, Being orders concrete experience in a fine mesh of pluralistic possibilities which all have roots in the moral foundation of Being. Living in truth is Havel's method of tracing the string back to its moral foundation, not to reveal Being, but instead to be living authentically. This is a point that Pontusso makes; however it needs to be spelt out more clearly. This chapter made the point that Havel is fundamentally a political thinker, he is primarily concerned with how we should act in a political way. His use of Heidegger's critique of modernity is only meaningful when coupled with his attempt to transform the political sphere. Havel does not share Heidegger's pessimism about the possibility of a politics genuinely open to question of Being, but he transforms the task of being open to that question: it becomes in his hands a matter living in the truth, not of revealing the nothing of Being. Havel sees political action as a means of recovering a meaningful political space where individuals can be authentic.

In order to demonstrate that the difference between Havel and Heidegger is Havel's political focus, this chapter explored the utility of art in both thinkers. For Heidegger, his thoughts on Mayer's poem, or on Van Gogh's painting of the peasant's shoes, suggest that art is a means of transcending the ordinary everyday world of experience. For Havel, art is a means of infusing meaning in the political sphere, and testing meaning in the political sphere.

The next chapter will further elaborate on Havel's idea of living in truth by exploring and ultimately rejecting the religious interpretation of Havel's thought.

Chapter 2: Exploration of a Religious Element in Havel's Political Philosophy

Introduction

This chapter will explore Havel's notion of Being and ask whether or not Havel's thought can be labelled religious or not. I can only give a tentative answer to this question because Havel does use a lot of Christian terminology in his writings, and yet is also explicit in his rejection of theism throughout his writing. However the question, whether completely answerable or not, is still important because it allows for a further examination of Havel's political philosophy. Not only that, Havel's possible religiosity has framed many analyses of his thought, and these will be explored in this chapter. Ultimately the argument of this chapter is that Havel's mentioning of religious symbols is best understood as coming from a lack of resources in his thinking to explain the idea of transcendence that is a hallmark of his work. Havel uses religious ideas in much the same way that he speaks of music and in much the same way as he uses the absurd in his plays: as a carrier of thinking that calls the present political moment into question. Havel is on a constant search for symbols to call the given world into question, and that some of these symbols are Christian is not a sign of Christian belief, but instead a use of symbols available to him that help express his thought. For example, if we explore the presence of hope in Havel's use of the absurd in his plays and in his writing on his plays, we find that hope, for Havel, is not necessarily a concept that requires a spiritually transcendent anchor.

In *Letters to Olga*, Havel writes that the theatre allows him to “grasp the world” in three meaningful ways.¹⁰⁰ The first is as a bridge to “interexistentiality;” as the theatre creates a community of others whose common participation brings the community together as a morally responsible and authentic presence. Secondly the theatre has the immediate power of demystifying the world of appearances. That is through the depiction of a reality on stage, and through the reflection, by the audience, on their own lives’ relationship to the reality of the stage’s life, a mirror is held up to the mendacious elements of the audience’s life. Ideological, and therefore inauthentic, behaviours coerced by ideology are revealed through the theatre and the impetus is then to be authentic with the knowledge that one has not been authentic. The third way that the theatre allows Havel to grasp the world is through the theatre’s power to represent the importance of structure and order in that it is structure and order which organises the performance. I take this to mean that Havel understands that dissent or living in truth is not a form of anarchism. That the structures of everyday life are to be explored and examined, but not necessarily completely abandoned. In other words, the theatre shows that the world of politics is a man-made construction, and that the construction itself is very important; but within that structure there needs to be a constant re-examining of the authenticity of behaviour. Havel’s dissident activities are not a promotion of a return to some state of nature, as chapters 7 and 8 will elaborate in greater detail, Havel’s thought is best understood as a liberal political philosophy. Drawing on the discussion of art in the previous chapter, there is, in the theatre’s depiction of an unreal world, a power to present, or open up a space for, the idea of political change.

In revealing the world of appearances, in that the theatre itself is a world of appearance, there is hope that the audience can recognise the elements of the unreal

¹⁰⁰ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 289.

play which are a real part of their lives. The theatre then is a catalyst for hope, without needing a guiding metaphysical principle to elicit progress. The theatre has the power of transforming agents to be able to see through ideology and then responsibly oppose it. In the *Letters to Olga*, Havel recorded his thoughts on absurdist theatre's relationship to faith and hope.¹⁰¹ For Havel, the absurd in theatre is a cry against meaninglessness. The presence of the absurd, in his plays, is the presence in faith; faith that the absurd in the world outside of the theatre can be overcome and that meaning can be restored to life.¹⁰² What is meaningful for Havel is left, as it usually is, unexplained. Havel ambiguously says that absurdist art is an attempt to orientate man towards the higher horizon of Being. This is not necessarily a theological horizon; it can be understood as a conceptual understanding of the world's historical traditions which have given rise to the current world situation. Some commentators give Christian readings of Havel on faith and hope. Patrick Deneen, for example, uses Christian philosophers to describe Havel's attitude to faith. It is my intention in this chapter to draw attention to a non-Christian interpretation of Havel's philosophy which I believe is better able to be sustained. It will be argued that Havel uses quasi-religious language in a symbolic or metaphorical way.

Some Problems with Being as God

The question of Havel's religious conviction has been raised in many scholarly articles on Havel. This section will critically examine the arguments advanced in this literature and offer an alternative interpretation of Havel's apparent religiosity.

101 Ibid 151-152.

102 See also J.P Stern "Havel's Castle" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 31-44.

Stephen Schiff's article from *Vanity Fair*, reprinted in a collection of critical essays on Havel is a useful starting point for exploring religious themes in Havel.¹⁰³ Schiff interviewed Havel for the article in 1991 and asked Havel why he was so willing to risk harm to himself on so many occasions throughout his life. His response was "It's fear of my conscience, or God, if you want."¹⁰⁴ Havel refers to a fear of God, but hedges. He is aware that people interpret his ideas in a religious framework and is not backing away from interpretations like this, but the important point is that he is not verifying them either. The telling word in that reply is "you." This suggests that Havel is happy for religious people, embarking on their own struggle for a life in truth, to use their faith in God to assist in the struggle against ideology. For Havel, to assert God as the source of conscience would put him on a path to supporting a dogma; which, as this chapter will explain, is in contradiction with a life in truth.

James Sire writes that Havel's considerations of morality are "close, if not identical, to a fully theistic conception of God."¹⁰⁵ He claims that a hallmark of Havel's work is a combination of Christian theism and Heideggerian metaphysics.¹⁰⁶ This is an odd claim for Sire to make, because, later in the book, he agrees with Roger Scruton's assertion that Heidegger "may be unintelligible."¹⁰⁷ As unintelligible as Heidegger is for Sire, Sire still claims that it is through a Christian and Heideggerian lens that Havel's work is best understood. However, I believe that Sire is overstating the case. Sire writes that Havel uses the term "Being" like a Christian uses "God." However this contradicts the elaborate rejection of Christian theism that Havel puts forward. In *Disturbing the Peace* Havel writes,

103 Stephen Schiff "Havel's Choice" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 75-89.

104 Ibid 86

105 James Sire *Václav Havel*, 59.

106 Ibid 55.

107 Ibid 96.

There are some things that I have felt since childhood: that there is a great mystery above me which is the focus of all meaning, and therefore is more than just a cluster of improbable accidents; that in my own life I am reaching for something that goes far beyond me and the horizon of the world that I know; that in everything I do I touch eternity in a strange way...genuine conversion as I understand it, would mean replacing an uncertain “something” with a completely unambiguous personal God, and fully, inwardly, to accept Christ as the Son of God, along with everything that that entails, including the liturgy. And I have not taken that step.¹⁰⁸

I am not able to fully reject the possibility of Havel’s theism; however I do reject the Christian interpretation of Havel. Havel is not offering a way to understand a deity; nor is he offering a Christian understanding of the universe as love or some other distinctly Christian position. He is solely concerned, as will be spelled out throughout the thesis, with responsible action in a political situation, any political situation. A life in truth does not require a Christian perspective. Demonstrating how one can reveal ideological apparatus at play in everyday life is not the task of the Christian. The Christian position, with its rituals, in the above passage seems like another ideological position - something perhaps to be overcome through a life in truth. Havel can be a moral absolutist and not be a Christian. Such a view is the best reading of Havel.

Hannah Arendt in her essay ‘What is Existential Philosophy?’ argues that what is characteristic about modern philosophy is the realization that the What will never be able

108 Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, trans Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 189.

to understand the That.¹⁰⁹ Arendt refers to Schelling's later philosophy which takes existence as its starting point. Schelling was aware that reason could not understand Being,¹¹⁰ and so rational consciousness is left with the paradoxical fact that it is and yet how it is and why it is are not answerable questions. Arendt traces this line of thinking through Kierkegaard, who interpreted Socrates' willingness to die on the gamble that there might be an afterlife as demonstrating Socrates acceptance of the contingent and paradoxical state of Being.

Socrates exemplifies the existing philosopher with his "if there is an immortality." "Was he therefore a doubter?" Kierkegaard continues... "By no means. On this 'if' he risks his entire life, he has the courage to meet death... The Socratic ignorance... was thus an expression for the principle that the eternal truth is related to an existing individual, and that this truth must therefore be a paradox for him as long as he exists."¹¹¹

My intention in introducing Arendt's explanation for the groundlessness of being, or the inability to find a ground, is to draw a parallel to Havel's attitude to Being. Arendt describes a tradition of doing philosophy *from* existence rather than *to* existence. Traditional theism works *to* existence. Existential phenomenology, the tradition to which Heidegger and Havel belong, is philosophy done *from* existence. It seems, then, that a theistic understanding of Havel's concept of Being misplaces his philosophy. The question is whether a close reading of Havel and Heidegger, and the relation between them bears this out. Since the previous chapter explored Heideggerian interpretations of

109 Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy" in *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. John Kohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 167.

110 Ibid

111 Ibid 173.

Havel it would be illustrative to tease out this idea further by exploring Heidegger's Being and asking if it is, in some sense, God.

I want to explore more fully the term Being and a possible theistic interpretation of it by examining John Macquarie's investigation of Heidegger's Christianity. As I argued in chapter one, I do believe that Havel is not as much of a Heideggerian as commentators such as Sire take him to be.¹¹² Heideggerian interpretations of Havel's work overstate the case. Simply because Havel capitalises the "B" in Being, and uses terms like 'thrownness' and 'existence-in-the-world', does not mean that we should read Havel as a Heideggerian. On the other hand, it doesn't follow that we should overlook all points of connection between Havel and Heidegger. Instead one should be wary. Havel makes use of Heideggerian terminology, and in so doing locates himself in the tradition of existential phenomenology. The question is can Sire's claim that Havel's Being is a reference to Christianity's God can be supported by any link between Havel and Heidegger? I will argue that it does not because Heidegger's concept of Being is not fundamentally theistic.

Macquarie, in his book *Heidegger and Christianity* discusses the problems with trying to find a neat concept of God in Heidegger.¹¹³ While not finding a philosophy that is consistent with a theistic perspective, Macquarie still pushes the idea that Heidegger is a religious thinker. He finds that in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, the impossibility of the saying 'Being is' highlights the converse usefulness of the phrase 'there is Being'. 'There is Being' implies a giving of Being. In order to explain this Macquarie quotes Heidegger.

¹¹² See Chapter 1 of this thesis.

¹¹³ John Macquarie, *Heidegger and Christianity*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999).

We try to bring the It and it's giving into view, and capitalize the "It". We are then to fix our attention on the 'It gives', which seems to be the source of Being and time. 'It gives Being' means that there is presence, that there is unconcealment, that Dasein is brought into the clearing.¹¹⁴

Macquarie then explains this somewhat confusing passage of Heidegger's in theological language:

'To think explicitly of God, you must think of him in abstraction from all created things,' or, to put it in another way, try to think of an act of pure creating, apart from any creature that is created. This would be to think of the ontological difference between Being and being, or theologically expressed, the difference between God and the ens creatum.¹¹⁵

Macquarie is almost equating Heidegger's concept of Being with a concept of God despite, as Macquarie points out, Heidegger's insistence that Being is not God. It seems as though Macquarie is tempting the reader to make the conclusion that Heidegger is a theist. Macquarie never explicitly writes that Being is God; but the strength with which Macquarie explains the idea of Being as the 'It gives' tempts the reader to equate Being with the ultimate image of the giver: God. For Macquarie, the 'It gives' is an act of creation; Being therefore is a creationary act. The obvious religious connotations of such a definition of Being are not lost on Macquarie. Macquarie writes that one might argue that "Being has taken the place of God".

¹¹⁴ John Macquarie, *Heidegger and Christianity* p.98.

¹¹⁵ Ibid

Heidegger himself claims that violence is permissible in hermeneutics, he could hardly object if some of his readers claimed to find meanings which he did not wish them to find. But it is the 'It gives' that is more ultimate even than Being and seems to come close to what has ordinarily been understood as God. In Christian theology, God is love. In Heidegger, 'It gives' is an act of giving or donation, and since he has told us that the 'It' which gives Being is Being itself, then the act of giving is also an act of self giving, and so not different in any major respect from love.¹¹⁶

Macquarie gives good grounds for asserting that 'It gives' is God-like in a number of absolutely central respects. However, Macquarie is unwilling to call this a Christian God. Instead he avers to Heidegger's reading of the history of western philosophy where the 'It gives' is forgotten "in favour of the gift which It gives'. Heidegger's notion of the forgetting of Being is explained by this preference and consequently the metaphysical urge in man is explained by Heidegger as an historical insecurity on the part of Dasein. The 'It gives' is an event, a manifestation of Being and time. The western tradition has objectified the gift which the 'It gives' gives and so metaphysics has been directed towards the substance of beings rather than viewing Being as an event of giving. Thus Heidegger's thought in one sense lambasts the Christian tradition for objectifying Being and in that act forgetting Being. However Macquarie is searching in Heidegger's thought for a "holy reality" – that is a transcendent force which is the heart of all Being. It is a bold move to call the transcendent in Heidegger's philosophy a "holy reality" and Macquarie does not make this move - as much as he would perhaps like to.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 99.

The idea of nothingness in Heidegger's writings appears as the foundation of Being. In his famous essay *What is Metaphysics?*, Heidegger writes that "Da Sein means: being held out into the nothing."¹¹⁷ This expresses an anti-foundationalist perspective. I agree with Macquarie that there is a sense of giving in the notion of Being, as Being gives a thingness to nothing. However Macquarie does not make the final leap in logic to call Heidegger's 'It gives' a god. Macquarie is wise in this decision. The matter of Heidegger's religiosity remains unclear and this lack of clarity is even more evident in Havel. Macquarie's ultimate conclusion is that if one looks for a personal God in Heidegger, it is not there; however, if one looks for an impersonal and non-essential God, who is more like an event than any kind of existing substance, who is "suprapersonal," then one could suggest that Heidegger is a theist. This is not entirely satisfying. Claiming a theistic principle sans personal god in Heidegger's thought seems strained. In the same way, the idea of a personal God, I contend, is not an aspect of Havel's thought, even though I cannot reject the possibility of a much broader theistic principle.

Havel's Being

Havel does not explicate a detailed philosophy of Being. Instead Being is inherent in his thought, it does not need to be found or explained. Instead, what is important for Havel is beings' relationship to Being. Havel's idea of 'living in the truth' presupposes a notion of Being. That is, a life in truth is a life lived in authentic relationship to Being. Or to use Havel's terms, a life lived in accordance with the order of Being. Sire writes on 'living in the truth':

First, there is a truth to live in. In Havel's work that truth is the presence of Being itself – that which makes everything to be. In practice it means that

¹¹⁷ Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?', in *Basic Writings*, 99.

when one is doing what one ought to do, one is expressing the character of being in the actions of its “thrown,” derivative other – that is, in human being. Being so understood, is a given, a fundamental, a presupposition.¹¹⁸

In light of this, it might be possible to draw a similarity between Heidegger’s ‘It gives’ and Havel’s Being. Sire calls Being “that which makes everything to be”.¹¹⁹ This sounds like an act of creation. But it would be detrimental to read too much into Sire’s explication of Havel. The giving nature of Being is only referred to minimally, as “that which makes everything to be. This is a misreading of Havel. Being is not a creationary force, it is the normative source of reality but not explained as the force of creation. Comparing this concept of Being to Heidegger’s concept of the ‘It gives’ is to make an interpretative leap that is unjustified. Also, the statement, “there is a truth to live in” is not how Havel would phrase it at all. Havel’s truth is a negative truth, that is, rather than thinking of truth as a concrete realizable condition at which we aim, Havel argues that a life in truth is a life that is constantly justifying oneself through self-scrutiny. Hence Havel does not argue that there is a truth to live in, contra Sire’s interpretation. For Havel, the valuable life strives to live truthfully; it does not aim at some pre-given truth. In fact, Macquarie’s analysis of Heidegger, which is useful for considering Sire’s analysis of Havel, is actually not applicable to Havel. Havel is doing something different in his analysis of how to behave to Being, not to discover Being, but to make a better political situation in which to live.

Havel’s sense of Being, in my opinion, is not a force that gives existence, it is the force of existence. It is that which exists. Havel describes Being as the sensation that something is. For Havel being is the normative source of reality; as mentioned in the

¹¹⁸ Sire, *Václav Havel*, 67.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

previous chapter, Being is the fundamental experience that something is. This is not a cryptic 'It gives' or some other creationary force. Havel's attitude to Being is thus: humans frame the world with normative demands on them and it is just better to understand the world in this response dependent way. I can't say that there is a metaphysical deity who calls us to responsibility; instead I argue that it is better to consider Havel as advising that it is fitting and satisfactory to frame the world in this way. I claim that Havel's Being is not even similar to Heidegger's Being. Havel is doing something completely different to Heidegger. Havel is concerned with how an individual frames their identity in the world and is warning of the danger of using ideology to frame one's decisions. Being is the world unmolested by ideology, hence it is the point at which to aim to escape ideological living.

Havel, when he does ambiguously explain Being, sees Being as capable of being divided, for the purposes of explanation, into two layers.¹²⁰ The first is the thrown world that a person finds themselves situated in – the immediate world of experience. The second, is the world of pure Being - the world outside of relative experience. It is from this world that Havel's 'higher' concepts like responsibility and life in truth arise from. This is because the second world incorporates all experiences. The best way to explain Havel's Being is through another writer who espouses a very similar view to that of Havel, David Foster Wallace. The essay 'Plain Old Untrendy Troubles and Emotions' puts forward a world view that helps explain Havel's two levels of Being.

Wallace describes two fish swimming who encounter a third fish who asks how the water is. The fish, confused, respond by asking each other water is. They are so caught up in swimming that they are unaware that they are even in water.¹²¹ Wallace unpacks

¹²⁰ Havel *Letters to Olga*, 358.

¹²¹ David Foster Wallace, "Plain Old Untrendy Troubles and Emotions" *The Guardian*, September 20, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/20/fiction> (accessed September 21, 2008).

this joke to explain how so many people are caught up in feeling themselves to be the centre of their own private universes, that they forget they are in a larger universe. Describing a trip to the super-market after a busy and frustrating day at work where everyone is tired and rude, Wallace suggests a new perspective. Rather than seeing the rudeness of the clerk as a direct attack on you, think instead that perhaps she has some personal tragedy which is taking up her mind, or something else, which removes you from being the cause of all reactions in the universe. In other words, remind yourself that you are swimming in metaphorical water, rather than take the world as it is given to your perception with you at the centre of your private insular universe. Such thinking that goes away from the self, is, for Wallace, sacred. For Havel, this is being responsible to the second layer of Being. In the next two chapters I will explore the relationship of Havel's thoughts on Being as sum of all experiences, and its relationship to Jan Patočka's idea of negative Platonism. Here though I want to draw attention to the Socratic leanings of the notion that Being is the negation of the singular experience of the self, and the move towards an understanding of a greater shared experience.

An illustration from one of Havel's plays, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, is an appropriate example Havel's position.¹²² The play was first produced in 1969 and received an Obie award in the 1969-1970 awards. *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* is, as Sire notes, a play with many stories existing simultaneously.¹²³ The story to focus on here is that of Huml. Huml is a social scientist who is dictating an essay on happiness to his secretary, attempting to have many extra marital affairs.

When Huml is dictating a manuscript on human happiness to his secretary the dictation he is giving sounds very much like Havel's own position. Huml speaks of layers of human interaction, historical values, the importance of justice, the detriment of

¹²² Václav Havel 'The Increased Difficulty of Concentration,' trans by Vera Blackwell, in *The Garden Party and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 140.

¹²³ Sire, *Václav Havel*, 35.

scheming and alienation; yet despite the surface level importance of the dictation, it is empty, without life, and is hence somewhat meaningless – just a dictation of empty words. Chapter 4 will more fully explore the critique of discourse in this play, but here the point should be made that when the meaning of life is recorded down, it becomes dogmatic, like a dictation to a secretary. It is a speech about life made without life and hence becomes another aspect of the absurd in the play.

A number of other Havel commentators muse on the possibility of a personal God in Havel's work. An early scholarly article exploring the possibility of a religious element to Havel's thought is *Havel on Political Responsibility* by Peter Lawler.¹²⁴ Lawler is equivocal regarding the presence of a theistic principle in Havel's writings. The purpose of his article is to introduce the thought of Havel to America by comparing similarities in Havel's thought and the work of Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn is unambiguously a Christian. Lawler writes that one of Solzhenitsyn's criticisms of the west is that western societies have "deprived themselves of the gifts of nature and God – courage and spiritual life – that are the precondition for what happiness is possible for human beings."¹²⁵ Setting up a discussion of Havel's address to Congress, Lawler describes Solzhenitsyn's term 'humanistic autonomy' as the idea that man is "free from any force above him."¹²⁶ The suggestion is that a moral life requires a Christian theology; the result of freedom from Christianity is enslavement to the ordinary and every day and a loss of a moral society. I do not agree with the implicit argument in Lawler's article that the secularisation of society is responsible for the loss of a moral and meaningful political sphere. I think that it is possible to read the critique of modernity in Havel, and in

124 This article is summarised by James Pontusso, but there are problems with Pontusso's summary. Pontusso misreads the article, claiming implausibly that Lawler is clear in claiming that Havel is fundamentally a religious thinker. This is not the proper reading. Pontusso, *Václav Havel*, 18.

125 Peter Lawler, "Havel on Political Responsibility," *Political Science Review* 22 (1993) 24.

126 Ibid 25

Heidegger, as not only a move away from Christian metaphysics, but away from metaphysics in general. Later in the thesis I will use Havel's political philosophy to combat the alienated and de-politicised space of neo-liberalism, which has the hallmarks of the insular society Lawler describes as being a result of a move away from Christianity in the west. However I do not see the rise of neo-liberal thought as a result of a loss of Christian theological explanations of man. Later in the article Lawler confusingly asserts that Havel is not a Christian and that he has no faith in a Christian God.¹²⁷ Lawler confesses difficulties in understanding Havel without using the idea of a personal God. This is because Lawler can't seem to conceive of a higher horizon that doesn't take the form of a personal God.¹²⁸

Lawler in a later article changes his position somewhat after reading later speeches and letters by Havel that seem to him to promote a vague and confused spirituality.¹²⁹ This is not the most perceptive article on Havel; however it is directly concerned with the presence of religion in Havel's thought. The weakness in the article lies in Lawler's use of a later speech by Havel as a catalyst for revising an understanding of Havel's entire philosophy. This is a mistake because looking at the body of works by Havel the later speeches are far less important than the more thorough works of his dissident years. Nevertheless, Lawler's argument needs to be examined here.

The later speeches of Havel are evidence for Lawler that Havel is not a Christian.¹³⁰ Instead Havel engages in what Lawler terms "post modern science." This is basically an attempt to anchor moral principles, previously based on a transcendent authority like a

¹²⁷ Ibid 47.

¹²⁸ Ibid 47.

¹²⁹ Peter Lawler "Post Modern View of Man in the Cosmos" *Perspectives on Political Science*, 26 (1997): 27-35.

¹³⁰ The speech that is most illuminating in this respect is 'The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World' published in *The Futurist*, in 1995.

For example see Václav Havel, "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World" in *The Futurist*, July 1995.

Christian God, to a different, more currently acceptable authority. The first principle that Lawler describes is called the anthropic cosmological principle which is roughly explained as the idea that the universe emerged in the only possible way for life, and by that Havel means human life, to emerge. Hence the universe meant to be seen through our eyes because it has evolved to be seen in that way.¹³¹ The second is the Gaia hypothesis, which is the idea that the world is one big, connected, and living, system of which humanity is a part. In this way the 'world' becomes the universal principle which originates all possibilities and to which we are ultimately responsible. Havel does advocate both views in the speech 'The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World'; however this speech does not reflect the overall body of Havel's thought, nor does it represent revisions on Havel's part. They stand as an attempt to explain the complex term 'the memory of Being' but are not very persuasive.

What I find interesting in Havel's different attempts to explain Being in these confusing, ambiguous, and disappointing ways is that it appears as though Havel lacks a clear means of explaining his position. It is as if he is grasping for a symbol that will convey his idea of being responsible to a higher authority that is not theistic and that does not demand a set kind of behaviour. However, because the use of Christian symbolism in some of Havel's earlier writing is made with the same intention as these later speeches, the content of this speech shouldn't be rejected. The quasi-religious language is employed to explain something which Havel lacks the language to explain. In his earlier essay Lawler correctly claims that Havel's aim is to reveal the singular vision of ideology as mendacious compared to the true and pluralistic nature of humanity. Being responsible to a non-specific authority which reflects the pluralistic nature of the human condition is an ambiguous idea at best. Pontusso correctly critiques Lawler's argument

¹³¹ Peter Lawler "Post Modern View of Man in the Cosmos" *Perspectives on Political Science*, 26 (1997): 27-35

claiming that Havel is not proposing a Gaia principle as the ground of Being, but is instead attempting to rationalise the Gaia myth in order to rationalize existence.¹³² Havel's writings refer to as many sources as possible to symbolically convey whatever meaning he is trying to attempt. Pontusso writes that "Havel claims that there are no simple answers to the mysteries of existence – not even in religious texts."¹³³ Hence Havel resorts to myths to furnish his depiction of the ground of Being, which is the normative authority from which human action is understood. It is unfortunate, however, that the use of religious symbols further cloud the matter further than enlightening Havel's fundamental stance towards the order of Being. I point to Havel's career as a playwright and suggest that Havel is perhaps at times too much of a dramatist, searching for stories, myths and archetypes to explain his thoughts rather than clear and directed prose.

It is noteworthy that Lawler is not the only critic to contrast Havel's political thought to Solzhenitsyn. In a paper titled 'Solzhenitsyn, Havel and the Twentieth-First Century,' Edward Ericson Jr compares and contrasts the works of both thinkers. Ericson also notes that the problems that Havel expresses about using the word 'God'. He also notes the clumsiness with which Havel employs concepts like the 'memory of Being' and a 'horizon of Being'. According to Ericson, who agrees with Sire, Havel, despite the weakness of his religious affirmations must for ease of analysis, be considered as a Christian thinker. He writes, "If he doesn't say everything a Christian might, he doesn't say anything at odds with a Christian critique."¹³⁴ However, in the same paper, Ericson, in critiquing Havel's later (post 1989) world view, notes that a solution that Havel offered to the problems of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are to be found in ancient (that is pre-

¹³² Pontusso, *Václav Havel*, 46.

¹³³ Ibid 18.

¹³⁴ Edward Ericson Jr, "Solzhenstein, Havel and the Twenty-First Century" *Modern Age* 99, Iss 1 (1999): 4.

Christian) religions. What Lawler saw as a sign of paganism is credited by Havel as a bridge between the emerging problem of maintaining a peaceful co-existence “between different cultures within a single civilization.”¹³⁵ Appealing to pre-Christian mythologies and perceptions is in no way congruent with a Christian world view. Nor is the Gaia principle a Christian principle. Ericson is right to point out that Havel’s employment of manifold references to spiritual sources is better conceived as a way for his philosophy to be applicable to a global society. The description of Havel’s political philosophy as an attempt to say something meaningful for a global society is also in alignment with Havel’s aims. However Ericson’s view that Havel promotes a personal God is not correct.

Sire’s, Ericson’s and Lawler’s claim of a personal Christian God in Havel’s writings does not hold up to scrutiny. Nor does the idea of any single personal god appear concrete in Havel’s thought in any consistent way. There are occasions when one might draw the conclusion that there is mention of a singular personal god, however, closer inspection reveals Havel to be using a god as a symbol rather than as an object. In *Letters to Olga*, Letter 41 has mention of an idea which might be construed as a personal God.

And something else that is typical of my god: he is a master of waiting, and in doing so he frequently unnerves me. It is as though he sets up various possibilities around me and then waited silently to see what I would do. If I fail, he punishes me, and of course he uses me as the agent of that punishment (pangs of conscience, for example); if I don’t fail, he rewards me (through my own relief and joy) - and frequently he leaves me in uncertainty. (By the way, when my conscience bothers me, why does it bother me? And

¹³⁵ Ibid, 7.

when I rejoice, why do I rejoice? Is it not again because of him?) His Last Judgement is taking place now, continuously, always – and yet it is always the last: nothing that has happened can ever un-happen, everything remains in the “memory of Being” – and I too remain there – condemned to be with myself until the end of time – just as I am and just as I make myself.¹³⁶

It is true that that this deity of Havel’s is personalised and masculine in presence; however it is natural to read this as poetic imagery. At other times, as mentioned, Havel does refer to Gaia, a distinctly feminine spiritual force. It is not possible that the god mentioned above, along with the Christian references contained in the passage, can be asserted literally concurrently with what Lawler calls the pagan elements of Havel’s thought. It is a mistake to take a single passage of Havel’s writings that evoke an obvious symbol and pin it on him as evidence of a specific religiosity, due to the intentional ambiguities in describing the second layer of Being. Later in *Letters to Olga*, Havel describes the above mentioned dual layered theory of Being, which seems to be incompatible with the God mentioned in the section just quoted.

He begins the passage by describing a god who judges; but when the judgement comes in the second half of the fragment, the god seems to disappear from the analysis. It is Havel doing the judging – Havel who is responsible for his own past. There is no theistic principle required for this analysis. The memory of Being is not god, it is simply the past, the sum total of all experiences. Havel believes that the past is real and important, and that the past does not forget one’s actions, hence it is imperative to judge one’s own actions and be responsible for them.

¹³⁶ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 101.

Again, to me, this is evidence that Havel is continually grasping for a means of instigating thought and action about responsibility, he uses different descriptions for achieving that. Havel's way is a process of allusion and misdirection: using various techniques to show the second layer of Being rather than set out an ontological characterisation of it. The best interpretation of the above section is that Havel is arguing that a life in truth is a continuous judgement of oneself, a Socratic life that perpetually investigates the foundations of one's actions.

The presence of a somewhat mystical and judging conscience, I read as symbolic. This is supported in Václav Bělohradský's short paper on living in truth, 'The Jubilee.'

Bělohradský is an eminent Czech philosopher. He writes,

When does a person live in truth in Havel's sense of the word? Not when he respects some dogma; he lives in truth only when he crosses the boundaries of his own version of the world, finds himself on an alternative map of reality, and is constantly forced to justify his own positions.¹³⁷

An overarching, or even guiding metaphysical principle is not suggested by Bělohradský as being a necessary condition of a life in truth. Instead a life in truth is simply a continual search for authenticity through self-justification. Consequently there is no specific truth to live in; or in other words, there is no specific guide or plan or method to living in truth. This lack of specificity has caused problems for Havel the politician, as noted by Paul Wilson.¹³⁸ When President Havel did not vigorously hunt for communist sympathisers or informers, he was lambasted by the public. Wilson quotes Havel's

137 Václav Bělohradský "The Jubilee" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 249.

138 Paul Wilson "Václav Havel in Word and Deed" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 25.

attitude to Czechoslovakia's past, from Havel's New Years Address as President: "We cannot blame the previous rulers for everything, not only because it would be untrue, but because it could blunt the duty each of us faces... to act independently, freely and reasonably, and quickly."¹³⁹ Havel's advice is sound, but the lack of bloodletting and public spectacle that is inherent in Havel's attitude of individual responsibility for the horrors of totalitarianism left the public unhappy. Hence the support for people like Václav Klaus, Havel's successor as President, grew. But I want to suggest that there is real value in Havel's position. This value is expressed wonderfully by Lewis Lapham, who while meditating on Havel's writings at a ceremony honouring Havel said the following: "...if all of us were at fault for the shambles of American enterprise, then I had as much of an obligation as everybody else to find the words, or the rush of words, that could be bound to the task of telling a believable story."¹⁴⁰ To paraphrase the sentiment, Havel's position charges each individual to find the way of dealing with the current situation rather than a public bloodletting which does nothing to solve the problem. His lack of specific direction is a major part of living in truth due to the request for individuals to scrutinize their own behaviour to see their own complicity. With this model, the problems of totalitarianism are things that can be completely overcome. With the public scapegoating of prominent party sympathisers, the problems remain.

Doing politics Without Metaphysical Certainty

It would be worthwhile to briefly consider Peter Lom's paper comparing Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty. For Lom, what is important in Patočka's philosophy is the importance

¹³⁹ Ibid 25.

¹⁴⁰ Lewis Lapham "Play on Words" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 97.

of metaphysics, without needing to hold or promote any metaphysical certainty.¹⁴¹ I will further analyse Lom's argument in the next chapter, but it should be noted that the same analysis is equally applied to Havel. Havel is clearest when he is not promoting any one metaphysical certainty, and is instead advocating using metaphysical questioning to reveal the mendacious foundation of any ideological position. This point is supported by Caroline Bayard¹⁴² who sees in Havel's plays, a similarity with the politically directed writing of Jean Francois Lyotard. Bayard praises Havel's plays which suggest that in politics no discourse can have primacy over another. She notes that Havel's dissidents in his plays are far less eloquent than are the ideologues, who promote the dominant ideology. Consequently Havel's dissidents promote an anti-ideology rather than promote a different ideology. Bayard's point is that it is far better to oppose ideology in all its forms than to search for the ideology to replace the current one. Richard Rorty also writes about the utility of Havel's philosophy as a philosophy of dissent rather than a philosophy based a normative metaphysics. In fact Rorty focuses on Havel's dissent against ideology in his paper, 'The End of Leninism, Havel and Social Hope.'¹⁴³

Havel's philosophy is pragmatically useful for Rorty as Havel, in Rorty's analysis, is an advocate of social hope rather than hope requiring a metaphysical underpinning such as faith or history; in other words it is a groundless hope.¹⁴⁴ Rorty has been taken to account for apparently misreading, or cherry picking, comments from Havel that advocate his view and ignoring ones which go against his pragmatic philosophy.¹⁴⁵ Patrick Deneen writes that Rorty ignores the clear and blatant use of metaphysics to

141 Petr Lom, "East Meets West-Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom: A Czech Philosopher Brought into Dialogue with American Postmodernism" *Political Theory* 27, No 4 (1999): 457.

142 Caroline Bayard, 'The Intellectual in the Post Modern Age,' *Philosophy Today* 34 (1990): 291-302.

143 Rorty "The End of Leninism," 228-243.

144 Rorty "The End of Leninism," 243.

145 Patrick Deneen "The Politics of Hope and Optimism: Rorty, Havel, and the Democratic Faith of John Dewey(*)" *Social Research* 66, no.2, (1999): 652.

underscore any moral position in Havel. While it is true that Havel is no pragmatist, and that he does use, on occasion, metaphysical language, Havel, as Deneen concedes, does not explain his transcendent - it remains unsaid.¹⁴⁶ Deneen claims that Rorty shares with John Dewey a sense of faith in the ability of man to transform society through his actions alone. He writes that our willingness to believe in the narratives which modern societies weave lends modern societies hope for improvement. In this light Havel's invocation of transcendence is best read as a part of the narrative to promote societal improvement, rather than as faith in a metaphysical certainty. Havel should be read not as a religious thinker, or as a thinker promoting a religious certainty. Instead he should be read as a promoter of inquiry into mendacious social practices so that they can be improved incrementally. In the following chapters I will utilise the writing of Hannah Arendt and her idea of politics as "birthing" new human possibilities to further elaborate on the politics of Havel that I am defending here.

The view of a life in truth being more about inquiring rather than discovering truth is clearer when it is understood that there isn't a factual specific truth or precise normative framework that Havel has in mind in his philosophy. The idea of living in truth does not require one to live in a specific and ordered way,¹⁴⁷ for example a Christian life, instead it is about recognising how one's actions contribute to what in phenomenology is called the life-world. Perhaps some thinkers would argue that Havel is motivated to act by Christian beliefs whether he explicitly mentions them or not. I argue instead that Havel's notion of 'truth' that fills his idea of 'living in truth' is not a normative fact corresponding to any particular or specific state of existence. Instead, through scrutiny of one's actions, one can determine to what extent one's actions create and affirm one's situation. This is

¹⁴⁶ Ibid 582.

¹⁴⁷ After exploring the influence of Patočka in the next chapter, the idea that the truth that one lives for doesn't necessarily need to be known by the individual who is living for that truth, will be elaborated in much more detail.

more like a revealing of how one lives rather than advice on what particular actions one should take. Therefore a Muslim in Saudi Arabia, or, a Voodoo practitioner from Haiti, are both able to apply Havel's call for a close scrutiny of their actions. Without adopting Christian ideas, these citizens of vastly different cultural communities can see how their actions determine their political situation and can adjust their actions according to their sense of a better purpose for their civilization.

Tucker, in his book, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, writes that Havel's separation from Heidegger can be found in the fact that Havel does not, as Heidegger did, reject the Judeo-Christian moral tradition. Instead Tucker writes that "Havel often refers to his "responsibility toward Being" as what used to be called "responsibility to God."¹⁴⁸ Tucker continues: "Havel's moral principles are transcendental because truth and authenticity must originate beyond the human "I"; they must come from Being."¹⁴⁹ Tucker does not mean to imply Kantian transcendentalism, rather a more broad use to the word is Tucker's motive. For Tucker Havel's transcendental is that which appeals and relates to the world of Being. It is easy to see how with such an analysis it might be possible to assert that Havel's transcendental has a theistic nature. However, for Havel, even amoral principles have a transcendental origin. That is to say that for Havel, all action, whether good or bad by nature, originates outside of the human "I", not only good action. A supremely good force which lends itself to a theistic interpretation is missing. The higher horizon is not God but a higher horizon of Being. By a higher horizon of Being, Havel is referring to a horizon of experience that is greater than an individual's experience. It is the fabric of shared human experience in the world. As it is a shared experience, between times, countries, cultures etc., it is a

¹⁴⁸ Tucker *Czech Dissidence* 156-157.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 157.

source of responsibility. The higher horizon is what ties, as Lewis Lapham¹⁵⁰ describes, “the past to the present, the dead to the living, the citizen to the state, the now to the then.”¹⁵¹ The higher horizon is hence still a horizon of human experience. Paul Wilson quotes Havel describing the inter-relatedness of human experience.

The identity of each of us is composed of several layers. We are members of our family, or our profession, of our community, of our nation, of our state as a whole, of Europe. And if a citizen of California feels like a Californian, it doesn't mean that he can't, at the same time, feel like an American. When a lesser entity delegates certain functions to a higher entity, this does not mean that something is cut away from the lesser entity, that is, it is not something negative; it also means positive participation in the higher entity.¹⁵²

In the above quote Havel is arguing about Slovak involvement in the Czechoslovak state before the separation of the two nations. However I read in the argument a good description of what Havel's higher horizon might mean – a shared and layered world of different experiences.

The nature of the higher horizon and its impact on an individual's experience is exemplified in Havel's famous story of the greengrocer, described in Chapter 1. The point to take from that discussion is the absence of any metaphysical certainty or theistic principle. Despite Being remaining undescribed, Havel could still infuse the story with a sense of morality and authenticity. Havel argues that it is better for the greengrocer to

150 I should note that Lapham is quoting Havel to describe the source of responsibility. He does not use the phrase “higher horizon”. However Havel claims that responsibility derives from the higher horizon and so I believe Lapham's quote is suitable for this description.

151 Lewis Lapham in Goetz-Stankiewicz & Carey (ed), *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, 96.

152 Havel in Wilson in Goetz-Stankiewicz & Carey (ed), *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, 27.

frame the world with a normative sense of responsibility – in other words for Havel, the world is better when the greengrocer behaves authentically.

Žižek in the *London Review of Books* writes

Havel's concept of living in truth involved no metaphysics: it simply designated the act of suspending one's participation, of breaking out of the viscous cycle of objective guilt. He blocked off all the false escape-routes, including seeking refuge in the small pleasures of everyday life. Such acts of indifference, making fun in private of official rituals, for instance were, he said, the very means by which the official ideology was reproduced.¹⁵³

I agree with Žižek on this point, that at no point is recourse to a metaphysical principle required to defeat the totalitarian regime through the non-political politics of a life in truth.¹⁵⁴ Havel is stressing the paramount importance of personal responsibility. The conditions in which one lives are a direct result of the way in which one lives. Seeking for escape from an oppressive regime through poetry, or private whispering, only asserts the authority of the regime that one needs to escapes from. Being responsible for how one lives makes one responsible for the ideology that lays out the political climate of one's life. Actively denying the system makes the ideology obsolete. The transcendent force in Havel's story is life itself, a pre-political sense of oneself. This is what Rorty found so attractive in Havel's philosophy. It is pragmatically useful, without needing to explicate a metaphysics.

¹⁵³ Slavoj Žižek "Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism" *London Review of Books*, October 28, 1999.

¹⁵⁴ It should be noted that Žižek is highly critical of Havel in this essay, however I do find some of the analysis useful.

Havel is interested in the pre-political components of political action.¹⁵⁵ Political action, for Havel, is an individual action. Individuals comprise the system and so any change within a system is to come through individuals. The idea of an individual being responsible for their own conditions is not new; however Havel is using the idea as the foundation for a political philosophy that aims to encompass a global community. Havel's global relevance is mentioned in Žižek's article, 'Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism.' Žižek points out that Havel agrees with Heidegger in calling communism an "inflated caricature of modern life, with many tendencies shared by western society."¹⁵⁶ Žižek writes that Havel posits instrumental reason not in actual and factual capitalist social relations, but instead as the "quasi-transcendental foundation."¹⁵⁷ Žižek writes,

The moment that Havel endorsed Heidegger's recourse to quasi-anthropological or philosophical principle, Stalinism lost its specificity, its specific political dynamic, and turned into just another example of this principle (as exemplified by Heidegger's remark, in his, Introduction to Metaphysics, that in the long run, Russian Communism and Americanism were metaphysically one and the same).¹⁵⁸

Havel is not only a critic of the totalitarian socialist government, Havel is also aware that western liberal democracies do not offer the kind of authentic life that Havel is searching for. For Žižek, Havel is naïve. The logic of the post-totalitarian societies is akin to the logic of capitalism. For Žižek, Havel is distinctly unable to describe an effective society

155 Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Václav Havel on Freedom and Responsibility" in *Theory and Practice*, ed Ian Shapiro and Judith Wagner DeCew (New York: New York University Press, 1995): 464-482.

156 Slavoj Žižek "Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism" London Review of Books, October 28, 1999.

157 Ibid.

158 Ibid.

because the alternative society that Havel looks to as a moral example (the west), has a foundation that is the same as the socialist foundation.¹⁵⁹ Žižek's argument, which he repeats numerous times in many places, is that communism opened a space for utopian thinking; hence Havel, arguing for a life in truth, is doing so in a space opened up by communism in the first place.¹⁶⁰ This is absurd. Havel clearly, throughout his career does not simply argue for a replacing of socialist values with western ones. He is constantly critical of the west's abandonment of ideas worth sacrificing for. Hence the space for a life in truth as dissent is just as open in western capitalism as it is in socialism.

In fact, in tracing Havel's thoughts back through Patočka over the next two chapters, Havel's thought will be revealed to be far less naïve that Žižek continuously claims. Aprad Szakolczai traces the political problems of Eastern Europe to the history of ideas in Europe.¹⁶¹ He argues that the role of Patočka as a public intellectual is deeply informed by an engagement with Nietzsche. I argue that it is in the space of Patočka's engagement with the history of ideas that Havel develops his thought, not in the space created by the oppression of socialism as Žižek claims. In other words, Nietzsche's, (and following Nietzsche's, Heidegger's) critique of modernity in the language of a critique of the history of ideas grounds Havel's thought and not some utopian moralising which is only a reaction to the violence perpetrated by the socialist state as Žižek paints it.

Žižek's claim that Havel totally agrees with Heidegger's conflation of the underlying metaphysics of the socialist and capitalist societies is contested by Lawler in his article "Havel on Political Responsibility." Lawler contends that Havel clearly explains a

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ See Ibid.

Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, (London: Continuum, 2007), 46.

See also Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, (New York: Verso, 2002), 89-92.

¹⁶¹ Aprad Szakolczai "Moving Beyond the Sophists; Intellectuals in East Central Europe and the Return of Transcendence," *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, iss 4 (2005), 417-433.

difference between on the one hand societies whose political life has been reduced to a mere ritual of participation in ideology, and, on the other hand, societies who exhibit some tendencies to adopt an ideological life.¹⁶² Havel is acutely aware of the shortcomings of western liberal democracy. Scientism permeates the capitalist perspective as much as the socialist; however for Havel, a life in truth is much easier to achieve in a democratic state than it is in a post-totalitarian society. It would be better than to say that for Havel, both capitalist and socialist societies exhibit symptoms of the crisis of modernity explained in chapter one; however in liberal societies, a life in truth is easier to achieve due to the civic freedoms in possession of each citizen. The liberal aspect of Havel's thought will be explored in Chapter 7.

Bělohradský writes that the most attractive aspect of Havel's 'The Power of the Powerless' an essay from which he and his friends in Italy took many quotes to adorn their walls¹⁶³ was this idea that "totalitarianism is nothing but an image of the West in a convex mirror."¹⁶⁴ Hence in chapters 7 and 8 I will utilise the political philosophy of Havel, elaborated in these early chapters, to think through and contest aspects of contemporary western politics to show the utility of Havel's thought outside of his specific historical situation.

An Encounter with Post-secularism

The argument against Havel's religious leanings has been driven by the metaphysical language employed by critics of Havel. I have shown how such attempts to describe Havel as a doctrinal Christian fail. However, in recent years, what is known as the post-secular turn in philosophy proclaims a different understanding of religion, one which

¹⁶² Peter Lawler "Havel on Political Responsibility," *Political Science Reviewer* 22 (1993): 42.

¹⁶³ Bělohradský in Goetz-Stankiewicz & Carey (ed), *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, 247.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid 248.

Havel might fit into. Post-secularism is a broad field of scholarship incorporating thinkers from many religions and even atheism.

In 2003, Phillip Blond edited the volume *Post-secular Philosophy*.¹⁶⁵ This anthology represents a major work of post-secular thinking. The essays in this volume aim to demonstrate the timeliness of a return to theology in modernity. The common theme amongst post-secular thinkers is that modernity faces a form of nihilism that a new understanding of theology offers a pathway out of. This new pathway is a recovery of metaphysical thinking. This is not a return to metaphysics, but a return to thinking metaphysically. The collected essays in Blond's volume address this theme through a reexamination of European philosophy that demonstrates how a reconfiguration of a theistic God is possible. Two examples from this anthology will suffice as example of the arguments contained therein. John Peacocke reconfigures Heidegger's concept of Thinking to demonstrate that the concept can be construed as thinking for the existence of God.¹⁶⁶ Also, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams reads in Hegel the idea that the modern state needs to lose its being-in-itself in order to find meaning from an outside source. This move between the transcendent outside and the in-itself inside of the state is the role of theology for Williams.

The secularist Simon During wrote in 2005 that secularism is ill-prepared to deal with a post-secular turn as the methods of secularism, built up in the enlightenment focus on rationality, are poorly suited to think through religion today.¹⁶⁷ He argues for a return to Leo Strauss who was "nostalgic for a collective existence ordered by revealed laws, at once worlded and cosmological, which might underpin the virtuous search for perfection."¹⁶⁸ During argues that in taking such nostalgia seriously, but also

165 Phillip Blond (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 57.

166 John Peacocke "Heidegger and the problem of onto-theology" in Phillip Blond (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 193

167 Simon During "Towards the Postsecular" *PMLA* 120 (3) 2005, 876.

168 Simon During 877

simultaneously avoiding a dismissal of modernity, a possibility for a meaningful encounter with religion that is politically beneficial is possible.¹⁶⁹ Post-secularism is also well captured in the published 2009 debate between Slavoj Zizek and John Millbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*. In this debate regarding the nature of Christ in a post-secular world, they manage to explore the relationship between faith and reason, ultimately showing that distinctions between them are not so black and white. The debate highlights the claim that in the closed system of capitalist ideology, theology offers a new portal for transcendence.¹⁷⁰

Post-secularists argue that the secularism of the last few hundred years has run its course and religion has not disappeared. Instead, religion is to be found in experiences of transcendence other than traditional religious forms. One such change is that religion, in a secular age, is relegated to the private realm. The state might be secular; however, citizens believe a variety of religious creeds simultaneously in the same political space. Jurgen Habermas, in his paper “Notes on a Post-Secular Society” argues that: “Today, public consciousness in Europe can be described in terms of a “post-secular society” to the extent that at present it still has to “adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularised environment.”¹⁷¹ For Habermas, post-secularism is important for its attempt to have many faiths living together not only peacefully but in a manner which encourages flourishing in the one space.¹⁷² In a time when the state is increasingly secular while the experience of religion - whether it is expressed in the form of fundamentalist acts or some other manner – is politically inflammatory, Habermas argues that a post-secularism focusing on the mutual

169 Ibid

170 Creston Davis “Introduction” in John Millbank & Slavoj Zizek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*(Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009) 3

171 Jurgen Habermas, “Notes on a Post-Secular Society”, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (4) 19.

172 Ibid 23.

recognition of all religions in the state is important.¹⁷³ For Habermas, the ideal society is one in which all citizens recognise each other as equal citizens with equal rights.¹⁷⁴ That recognition is not to take the form of a respect for alien practices such as one might pick up while travelling and seeing another culture. Instead, for Habermas, this recognition is to take the form of a real tolerance: a tolerance where each citizen recognises in each other citizen a mutual responsibility for political contributions and is equally accountable for those contributions.¹⁷⁵ Hence, rather than a secularist adopting a hardline stance about the invalidity of religious claims, Habermas argues that we should be considering a stance which allows an understanding of shared citizenship.¹⁷⁶ The great benefit of secularism is that it refuses to drop equality from its understanding of society.¹⁷⁷ Hence we encounter a fine balancing act between the progress of reason and the demands of a shared multicultural society.

Havel's pluralism, with its focus on the plurality of the experience of Being could contribute a lot to Habermas' project. For Havel, all religious creeds are to be respected. Havel's faith in globalisation as a force for creating discourse between cultures in a way which celebrates their difference and shows their universally shared values is consonant with Habermas' project of doing politics in a post-secular age. However, this still doesn't get to a post-secular argument for religion that could encompass Havel's position.

Charles Taylor argues that in the current age, the arguments against faith and god made by the new atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, shed no meaningful light on the still existing phenomenon of belief.¹⁷⁸ The new atheists are a collective who share the view that any belief in a transcendent deity is irrational and dangerous for the world politically. For Taylor, a much more interesting

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid 27.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid 28.

¹⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

discussion unfolds when one considers the conditions of belief rather than the structure of belief.¹⁷⁹ For Taylor, one common experience today that leads one to the view that we are in a post-secular age is that despite the rapid development of secularism since the enlightenment, there is still an experience of a transcendent whole that is available to all people.¹⁸⁰ This transcendent whole is the experience “which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities and points of reference.”¹⁸¹ Such an experience could take the form of a contemplation of a sunrise, a moment of insight, or a burst of energy. Taylor writes that these moments afford us some cosmic insight into our own lives where it appears as though things have lined up. Taylor does not make a simple move to say that this transcendent whole which breaks through the ordinary is God. However, he does suggest that experiences like these provide the condition for belief. Taylor is especially interested in such experiences which allow us to live better in the world. That is when the transcendent and the mundane combine rather than negate each other.¹⁸²

A similar view of transcendence today is described by Phillip Blond. He argues that theology today needs to be practiced at the level of perception.¹⁸³ For Blond, locating God in traditional metaphysics is not in line with the experience of transcendence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For Blond, (referencing Maurice Merleau-Ponty,) immanence and transcendence are both available to perception.¹⁸⁴ Blond argues that when we open our eyes and see the transcendent immanent in our experience of the world we see that Christianity is a real alternative to discourses of modernity which promote nihilism.¹⁸⁵

179 Ibid 2-4.

180 Ibid 5.

181 Ibid.

182 Ibid 19.

183 Phillip Blond “Introduction” *Post-Secular Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 57.

184 Ibid.

185 Ibid 49.

Taylor notes his own problems with the word 'transcendence.'¹⁸⁶ A focus on transcendence might lead to a rejection of the present in favour of a higher reality – the afterlife. Instead Taylor argues for an oscillation between transcendence and flourishing in the earthly realm. For Taylor it is important to fuse God into our lives. That is to manifest and incarnational mode of life.¹⁸⁷ Such a life lives in both secular time – the time of the present only - and eternal time.¹⁸⁸ Incorporating the higher time of eternal time into the experience of the mundane, for Taylor, allows a greater experience of the present.¹⁸⁹ This incorporation gets at what Taylor means in prescribing the oscillation mentioned above. For Taylor, incorporating God into our lives allows the human to see itself as something that goes beyond itself.¹⁹⁰ This is for Taylor the vital move in challenging the problematic nature of modernity which has lost its sense of transcendence.

In his description of being's relationship to Being, Havel does seem to supply an experience of a transcendent whole which throws light upon his mundane existence. In this sense Havel could, perhaps, be labeled as possessing a post-secular understanding of religion. However, this experience is more along the lines of Taylor's post-secularism than it is Blond's. Blond is looking for a theology in a way that Havel, as I have described his position above, could not accept. Blond says that God is phenomenal. Havel says that Being is phenomenal. It would be too big a move to say that Havel's Being is Blond's God. However, in a stance that fits with Taylor's position, Havel is searching for an experience of transcendence in the mundane world. However, it is inescapable that Taylor is arguing for the Catholic Church as the model for human flourishing. On this point Havel and

186 Charles Taylor, in Heft (ed.) *A Catholic Modernity?* (NC: Oxford University Press 1999) 109

187 Ian Fraser, 'Charles Taylor on Transcendence: Benjamin, Bloch and Beyond', *Philosophy Social Criticism*, 2003, (9), p.303

188 Ibid 305

189 Ibid

190 Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* 35.

Taylor can be said to come apart from each other. Havel, as already claimed, has no interest in restoring power to an ideological institution such as the church.

Havel's essay, 'The need for transcendence in a postmodern world' argues for the kind of transcendence Taylor desires.¹⁹¹ However, in Havel's hands, it is a more Habermasian respect for rights and freedom that is the point of transcendence, than it is Taylor's religious transcendence. For Havel, the possibility for transcendence arises in modernity from an acceptance of globalisation. The mixing of cultures that is effected by globalization allows one to step outside of one's specific place and culture and identify with more universal goals – such as rights and freedom.¹⁹² For Havel, in modernity, these higher values have been forgotten. He writes that "[t]his forgotten awareness is encoded in all religions."¹⁹³ What is encoded is not faith in a deity, but the possibility of self-transcendence. That is the knowledge that humans can overcome themselves. Havel writes that transcendence is "a hand reached out to those close to us, to foreigners, to the human community, to all living creatures, to nature, to the universe."¹⁹⁴ Such a conception of transcendence involves fighting against the tendency in modernism to view the self as an insular, disconnected being. Taylor would agree with such a view of the need for transcendence. Hence I cannot ignore the possibility of a greater discourse between Havel and post-secularity.

In this chapter I have been making claims about Havel expressly in terms of conventional theological metaphysics. Havel's own insistence that he takes part in no ideological religious practices allowed me to demonstrate that Havel is offering no metaphysical position which could be attached to Christianity. However, I must leave open the question of the extent of Havel's connection with post-secular thinking as for

191 Vaclav Havel 'Need for Transcendence' 47

192 Ibid.

193 Ibid 49.

194 Ibid.

Havel the kind of thinking that religion allows, engages with the higher values that Havel sees as having universal significance. Havel's possible contribution to post-secular thinking is beyond the scope of this thesis, which is dedicated to Havel's political philosophy, however I have demonstrated a possible starting point for considering such an engagement.

Conclusion

In exploring a possible religious element to Havel's political philosophy this chapter argued that Havel's position is best understood as non-religious. This conclusion was reached by exploring the claims for a religious element made in the scholarship treating Havel's philosophy. Arguments for Havel's Christianity fail to demonstrate an actual link to Christianity and not just a similarity. In continuing the theme from Chapter 1, this chapter explored Heidegger's concept of Being to see if it could be called Christian, or even theistic, and, in agreement with Macquarie, it was claimed that Heidegger's Being is not explicitly God and further to that that Havel's Being is not the same as Heidegger's Being. The presence of a theistic principle could not be wholly or definitively denied, but neither could it be affirmed. This analysis was applied to Havel's political philosophy and the same conclusion was reached. Havel's attitude to being, and the memory of Being is better understood, not as a theistic philosophy, but as a way of framing the world which puts claims of responsibility on us. That is, it is better for humans to be responsible for their past actions and their involvement in the world's bigger picture.

When you explore Havel's Being, the best conclusion to draw is that Being remains unexplained. His attempt to define Being in *Letters to Olga* are unsatisfying for the ambiguities they bring up. It is more helpful when Havel leaves Being as a presupposition

and concentrates on politics. The dictation by Huml to his secretary on the art of happiness, in the play *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, is a good example of this. Huml's dictation, because it is dictation, loses the meaning of the exposition because recording it takes it out of the human sphere. When Havel is giving prescriptive advice regarding Being he can be ambiguous and create more problems than he solves. When Havel addresses political issues, he is in far safer territory. Hence living in truth is best understood as a negative concept where the individual is forced, through self-scrutiny, to justify any position that they take. I agree with Bělohradský that Havel's living in truth is about revealing the mendacious structures of ideology in society and not living by their coercions. Finally, in this chapter I built on the allegory of the greengrocer to explore the analysis and criticism of Havel's thought made by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek's article on Havel highlighted key aspects of Havel's political philosophy and through a countering of Žižek's criticisms of Havel I leave open the possibility of finding in Havel a political philosophy useful for addressing issues in contemporary western politics.

Chapter 3: The Influence of Jan Patočka

Introduction

Before embarking on a study of Patočka's works and their impact on Havel it is important to note that a complete edition of Patočka's works in English is unavailable and that the Jan Patočka archive is in the process of publishing his works in French, German and Czech, the languages Patočka wrote philosophy in. I will not undertake a study of his untranslated work. It is not the aim of this chapter to give a full account of the corpus of Patočka's philosophy. Instead, the central aim is to highlight some of the major themes that permeate Patočka's work and find root in Havel's thought. There are enough works available in English translation to make this a possibility. There is also a significant, and growing, body of scholarship in English on Patočka's work, which has been utilised here.

A point regarding Havel's debt to Patočka which is generally missed in scholarship on Havel is that at no point in his philosophical writings does Havel actually engage with any particular text of Patočka's. This is symptomatic of Havel's general lack of engagement with the canon of Czech phenomenology and with any canon of philosophy in general. That is not to say that Havel does not contribute to the canon. Havel's contribution lies in his living of the philosophy espoused by Czech phenomenology and his writing from general themes of Czech phenomenology. Havel's philosophical writings are more like a guide to the practice of phenomenology than an engagement with the theoretical particulars of the canon. With this in mind the question could be posed, what point is there in even analysing the influence of Patočka if Havel doesn't engage with Patočka's texts? The answer is, in part, that Havel is influenced by Patočka the person more than

by particular texts of Patočka's.¹⁹⁵ That is, Patočka, like Socrates, was able to embody a philosophy that could be emulated in praxis, even in the symbolic character of his death. In analysing the Socratic death of Patočka it is easy to find a link between his activities leading to his death and the theoretical phenomenology contained in his writings. Erazim Kohák writes that for Patočka, "if the entire ideal order of being human—the true, the good, the beautiful, and the just—is to have any meaning, it must be appropriated in the act of the philosopher who stands up to bear it witness."¹⁹⁶ I take this to be related to the philosopher's return to the cave in Plato's cave allegory. In other words, the philosopher is not philosophizing by merely engaging with abstract concepts. To give theory meaning, it must be lived and lived for others. Therefore it is necessary to examine the practical example of his life (and death) as well as the theoretical aspects of Patočka's phenomenology as far as they inform action. It is the combination of these which influence Havel, not a specific text or argument.

For Patočka, the most important task of philosophy is calling the given into question. What is given is, for Patočka, the amalgam of the subjective experience of a thing and its manifestation as an objective thing. The given presents itself to consciousness and so is known as a phenomenon and not as either an objective 'reality' or a product of subjective idealism. This view of Patočka's is not unique. The intentional nature of consciousness is a major tenant of phenomenology. Essential to the presenting of a thing to consciousness, or as Patočka terms it, its unconcealing, is the concealment which penetrates the phenomenon, as a phenomenon can only present through the structure of its presenting. For example, one's consciousness, almost ineluctably, illuminates the

195 This point is illustrated by the lack of references to Patočka's philosophical writings in Havel's writing. It is in Havel's *Disturbing the Peace* that Havel offers his most comprehensive discussion of Patočka's influence, besides the obituary that Havel wrote at Patočka's death. Nearly every mentioning of Patočka is in regards to a conversation that they had, or a particular action of Patočka's. Havel does not systematically engage with any of Patočka's works in a scholarly way.

196 Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka; Philosophy and Selected Writings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 7.

given through structures of a specific time and place, through its historicity. Being conceals itself in this historicity and it is the task of philosophy—that is, phenomenology—to unconceal Being. Hence Patočka’s philosophy reads as a constant questioning rather than the espousal of a position. This is explicit in an essay by Patočka, ‘Platonism and Politics’. Writing about the importance of concepts like the Platonic ideas, Patočka writes, “For the real philosopher, i.e., who methodically and thematically awakens within himself the hidden meaning of humanity, there is no other possible path.”¹⁹⁷ Later in the same essay Patočka writes, “It can be difficult to live in philosophy because philosophy is the unceasing struggle against the natural direction of life”.¹⁹⁸ From this it is again easy to draw a comparison to Socrates.

The philosophy of Jan Patočka and the philosophy of Václav Havel owe a great debt to the earlier philosophy of the towering figure of Czech history, Tomáš Masaryk. Any explication of the influence of Patočka on Havel first requires an exploration of the humanist philosophy of Masaryk. The exploration would be of extra benefit to this thesis as Havel’s philosophical position, and his actions as President, have been compared by H. Gordon Skilling to Masaryk’s.¹⁹⁹ Erazim Kohák, in his illuminating work, *Jan Patočka; A Philosophical Biography*, has already provided a thorough account of Patočka’s interaction with Masaryk and so it is not necessary for this thesis to provide that. A brief summary of this interaction will nonetheless serve to highlight the main point of convergence between Masaryk’s thought and that of Patočka. As Kohák notes, the philosophy that unites Patočka with Masaryk is that of Edmund Husserl, especially the later work of Husserl centred around *The Crisis of the European Sciences*. After working

197 Jan Patočka, “Platonism and Politics,” trans Eric Manton, *The New Year Book for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* VI (2006): 342.

198 Ibid 343.

199 H. Gordon Skilling “Two Democratic Revolutionaries: Thomas G Masaryk and Václav Havel” in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, edited by Marketa Goetz- Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey, New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999, 105-111.

in his retirement with Patočka, Husserl gave Patočka a desktop lectern which had been given to him previously by Masaryk. Kohák writes that Patočka made mention of his inheriting a tradition.²⁰⁰

In his first philosophical work, *Suicide as a Mass Phenomenon of Modern Civilization*, Masaryk writes of a loss a pre-reflective religious perception of the world. As Kohák writes:

Modern man, as Masaryk sees him, perceiving the world through the eyes of materialistic, mechanistic science, no longer sees around him a meaningfully ordered cosmos in which good and evil, right and wrong, are as much primordial data as weights and measures.²⁰¹

This concern with thinking as *techne*, which is also prominent in the philosophy of Heidegger, and discussed in the previous chapter, is prominent in the thought of Patočka and Havel as well. If we can make a tradition of phenomenology in Czechoslovakia out of Masaryk, Patočka and Havel, the canon is centred around this loss of the question of being, or what Patočka terms the higher horizon of Being.²⁰² As Kohák notes, Masaryk turned to an objective sense of truth in order to infuse meaning and order into the cosmos whereas Husserl, exploring the manner in which objectivity is only meaningful in subjective experience, finds a phenomenological analysis of subjective experience to be the key to recovering from the pitfalls of scientism.²⁰³ Patočka conversely, engages with

200 Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 10

201 Ibid 12.

202 This is the same sense in which Havel uses the terms horizon and higher horizon as noted in chapters one & two.

203 Ibid 13.

both philosophical solutions and Kohák claims that his later philosophy represents a synthesis of Masaryk's objectivism and Husserl's analysis of subjectivity.²⁰⁴

As inheritor of a tradition stemming from Husserl and Masaryk, Patočka is obviously interested in phenomenology. For Patočka, phenomenology is the most useful philosophical method for contemporary times because even in an age where metaphysics and grand narratives have died, phenomenology allows an examination of how a thing is presented to consciousness. That is, phenomenology allows a philosophically reliable view of any particular situation and the elements of contingency that comprise phenomena. Patočka, interestingly, seems to accept that contingency plays a very important and shaping role in determining the structures of everyday life and the life-world, yet he also sees philosophy as having a great importance in shaping the world in the best possible way. Petr Lom, the translator of *Plato and Europe*, writes,

But how then is one to live according to truth, to care for the soul if one admits the basic historicity of man and the relativity of his orientation in the world? And why should this not lead either to despair or the abandonment of philosophy if one acknowledges that two thousand years of philosophy have not yielded incontrovertible certainties? Patočka's answer is that contingency still does not foreclose the possibility of philosophy. For philosophy is rendered possible precisely by the phenomenological fact that we are able to *distance* ourselves from all that is given despite our contingency, a distancing that is always possible because we never experience the world in an incontrovertible, unequivocal manner.²⁰⁵

204 Ibid 14.

205 Petr Lom in Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans Petr Lom, (CA; Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii.

Patočka's work is an always dense exemplification of the phenomenological method. His major and last work, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, aims to explain the European situation by peeling back the contingent layers of contemporary life. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* brings up notable influences on Havel's thought that are useful to keep in mind when exploring his writings. The specific phenomenological work of the text itself, I contend, is not a useful entry into Havel's thought as Havel makes no mention of it at all in his writings and speeches. There are certain Patočkean themes which are present in Havel, but it is more accurate to contend that these themes were presented to him through means other than engagement with the phenomenology of specific Patočkean works. I take *Plato and Europe* to be the most influential of Patočka's works on Havel. *Plato and Europe* is composed from unofficial lectures Patočka delivered to friends, in secret, in lounge rooms or other venues. Havel certainly attended these lectures and mentions them in his eulogy for Patočka. The theme of the lectures is fitting for conceptualizing Havel's works. Yet that is not to say the rest of Patočka's corpus of works is irrelevant to Havel's thought, as this chapter and the next will demonstrate. An examination of the theme of the *Heretical Essays* and other works can shed light on Patočka's concerns which might be considered to have transferred to Havel. The main theme of *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* involves questioning the meaning of history, in particular, European history. This is not a Havelian theme, but Patočka's conclusions, I argue, are a major influence on Havel.

Patočka, Havel and Arendt

The *Heretical Essays* begins with an analysis of pre-history that explicitly builds on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, where Arendt describes human history as beginning with the human undertaking of 'work.'²⁰⁶ Work, for Arendt, is acting to create

206 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 136.

something beyond the self, and Patočka too describes work as the beginning of history and the recognition of the burden of being a finite being.²⁰⁷ As work reaches beyond the self, to preserve life and create life, the political sphere has its origins in work – work makes the world where people relate politically. Throughout the *Heretical Essays* Patočka mentions his debt to the groundwork offered by Arendt in *The Human Condition*. This is interesting because Havel is a thinker whose work also bears close comparison to that of Arendt in some regards which this thesis will spell out. Both hold that a conflict of ideas in the political sphere is a healthy and authentic means of self-expression. Havel, however, does not mention ever reading Arendt. Jean Bethke Elshtain notes that Havel and Arendt escape the pragmatism of Rorty and others, in that both use political analysis to analyse the concrete rather than the abstract.²⁰⁸ In an explication of Havel's in-between stance on political matters, that is neither left nor right, Elshtain responds to the criticism of Patočka and Havel made by Richard Rorty that neither thinker requires the concept of the higher horizon which frames their philosophy. For Elshtain, Rorty and thinkers like him miss the fact that their own philosophy, despite proclaiming the universality of contingency, is still linked to the idea of progress. Arendt calls concepts like this, "banisters", and Elshtain notes that Havel, like Arendt, is explicit about their reliance on them, rather than Rorty who is deliberate in hiding his reliance on them.²⁰⁹

With Arendt, Havel is utterly resistant to the alchemy of "the dialectic" that transforms concrete evils into abstract goods. There is a beyond, and that is

207 See especially the first and second essays in Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans Erazim Kohák Ed James Dodd, (Illinois: Open Court, 1996).

208 Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Václav Havel on Freedom and Responsibility" in *Theory and Practice*, ed Ian Shapiro and Judith Wagner DeCew (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 478.

209 Ibid 478-479.

why the here and now, this moment as a concrete slice of all moments, takes on such shimmering vitality and importance.²¹⁰

This is important because one of the hallmarks of both Patočka's and Havel's philosophy is the insistence that there is a 'higher horizon' of Being which frames our experience of the world - something beyond any subjectivist or relativist account of the world. In 'Platonism and Politics', Patočka writes that the role of philosophy is to not engage in the "daily praxis, which is always based on sophistry and mysticism,"²¹¹ but is instead to base activity around a political idea in the platonic sense of idea. On the one hand, the philosopher recognises that the ideas are practically not useful, but on the other hand, the philosopher recognises the mythic nature of all political systems; the ideas become a means of holding the myths to account. Philosophy is described by Patočka here as being a purification as the philosopher reaches into their inner selves, in a search for inner truthfulness, and from this basis alone is philosophy given the right to "establish norms for life."²¹² In other words, the philosopher, in considering the higher horizon of Being, is in the unique position to consider the horizon which frames the myths which sustain political systems.

Rorty criticizes Patočka for accepting the role of contingency in life whilst still holding to an idea of an ideal form. In a similar vein, Rorty argues that Havel's best contribution to philosophy lies in the example of charter 77. "Charter 77 supplied us with a new example of social poetry, of the poetry of social hope. That example makes clear that such hope can exist, and can sometimes even be fulfilled, without backup from a philosophy of history and without being placed in the context of an epic or tragedy whose

²¹⁰ Ibid 479.

²¹¹ Patočka, "Platonism and Politics" 342.

²¹² Ibid.

hero is humanity.”²¹³ I think that Rorty is deliberately reading Havel selectively to suit his purposes.²¹⁴ Charter 77 is perhaps an example of ‘social poetry’, whatever that means, but it is also the core idea in Havel’s political philosophy. In his writings not tied to the charter 77 movement, Havel argues incessantly that the task of life is to be open to Being; life is the tragedy of which humanity is the hero. Tragedy is a concept that is intrinsic to Havel’s philosophy. In his ‘New Year’s Address to the Nation,’ his first as President, Havel describes the previous ideology’s failures as the Czechoslovakian people’s failures. The speech is designed to depict a tragic scene, and the task of the present and future is to embrace that tragedy and thereby overcome it. He writes, “we must accept this legacy as a sin we committed against ourselves. If we accept it as such, we will understand that it is up to us alone, to do something about it.”²¹⁵ The acceptance of responsibility for the tragedy of socialism entails framing a possibility of a better world, against a higher, moral horizon of Being. Havel can say that a liberal democracy is a better form of Government than socialism because for Havel, that form of Government is better able to produce a more authentic relationship with Being. It is unwise to do as Rorty does and remove the element of transcendence from Havel’s philosophy. The idea of transcendence is also intrinsically linked to Patočka’s philosophy and the idea of tragedy.

Robert Pirro compares Havel’s tragic vision of Czechoslovakia to Hannah Arendt’s tendency to conceptualise historical events as tragedies.²¹⁶ This is an important point which needs further elaboration. Pirro is right to suggest that Havel’s framing of the Prague Spring of 1968 as a tragedy is similar to Arendt’s framing of the 1956 Hungarian revolution as a tragedy. Both write that the event has significance far beyond the actions

213 Rorty, “End of Leninism,” 243

214 A more detailed examination of Rorty’s reading was made in Chapter two.

215 Václav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 5.

216 Robert Pirro ‘Václav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy,’ *Political Theory* 30, no.2, (2002):241.

of the event. For Kant, the enlightened aspect of the French revolution was found in the attitudes of the onlookers as they felt sympathy for the aims of the revolutionaries.²¹⁷ In the same way, the Prague Spring and Hungarian Revolution are events which maintain their spirit of attempting to create freedom despite the failure of the events to realise their intended aims. Havel does not take his cue from Arendt however; it comes through Patočka, who saw history as a mode of being in truth.²¹⁸ Patočka, reading Arendt's *The Human Condition*, sees strife between free individuals in a political sphere as the barrier to the detrimental effects of passive consensus. Philosophy, for Patočka, problematizes life and creates the impetus for conflict. Hence events like the Hungarian revolution are as significant for Patočka as they are for Arendt. The significance of these actions lies in the attempt to make society a better place, not through the crafting of more legislation but instead through genuine action.

Here it seems necessary to explain a fundamental differentiation of three kinds of human action in Arendt's philosophy. The three categories of human activity are: labour, work and action. For Arendt, through the activity of labour, the human condition is that of *animal laborans*, concerned solely with self survival. The *animal laborans* is totally subject to necessity – to nature – and hence is unfree, requiring continuous toil to remain alive.²¹⁹ Arendt notes that the distinction between labour and work is clear in the connotation with work of an attachment to a finished product, whereas labour denotes the constant toil in production. To distinguish between labour and work Arendt points out John Locke's distinction between work of the body and work of the hands. The latter has

217 Kant makes this claim in his essay 'A renewed attempt to answer the question 'is the human race continually improving?'' This essay is published in Immanuel Kant "What is Enlightenment?" trans. Mary Smith, <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>, (accessed on 6 August, 2009).

218 Kohák *Jan Patočka*, 28

219 Arendt *Human Condition*, 84.

an element of artifice whereas the former is characterised as toil.²²⁰ Work, as described above, is a different kind of action because it fashions something out of the world. That is, work transcends the basic biological needs of life. Work is the human condition as *homer faber* – the man who “works upon”.²²¹ Work creates an objective world against human subjectivity.²²² In other words, it makes the worldliness of the human condition – or work fabricates the world in which humans form communities. Like labour, work is not an activity for Arendt that is free. That is there are necessary conditions on work. Freedom, for Arendt, is political - freedom is found in the pluralistic conception of humanity. Work is not political, as even though it creates the world in which political action occurs, work remains an act of the individual. Arendt classifies action as the activity of humanity whose basic character is freedom. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes regarding action in Arendt:

No two human beings are alike, so people must relate to one another, must come together, find ways to live together, negotiate their differences, exchange opinions, found relational political institutions in the world they have created. A person may labour alone or be a fabricator alone, but “action is completely dependent upon the constant presence of others.” Among the animals, a human being, as Aristotle said, is uniquely a *zoon politikon*, a creature of political relations. There are other conditions, too, including the temporally defining conditions of human existence, natality and mortality: a person must be born and must die. Arendt notes that action also has a close connection to the condition of natality because “the new beginning inherent

220 Ibid.

221 Ibid 136.

222 Ibid 137.

in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”²²³

Through interactions with others we gain a distance from the world we are thrown into. This distance allows the beginning of something new. Action is generative for Arendt, hence her claim of a link between natality and action.

Through practical actions with others, an individual manifests political action – the highest form of human action. Patočka shares Arendt’s observation that real political action is only possible when we distance ourselves from the world that is immediately at hand. In an earlier essay, ‘Politics and Understanding’ Arendt writes that as political action aims at a new beginning, understanding is the form of cognition which prepares the ground for a new beginning. She argues that understating brings humanity to awareness of what has happened and what unavoidably exists.²²⁴ I take Arendt to mean that understanding gives us a necessary distance from the world so that we can realise our potential as a new beginning. Her description of the role of imagination in understanding supports this reading. Imagination, Arendt writes, “alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge the abyss of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair.”²²⁵

Mere knowledge, as Arendt terms the kind of knowledge of the natural sciences, erects artificial barriers to understanding, which as a consequence inhibit

223 Elisabeth Young Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 81.

224 Arendt *Essays in Understanding*, 321-322.

225 Ibid 323.

understanding.²²⁶ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes about an Archimedean point that science revealed which has given an objective view of nature that has disastrous implications for human action.²²⁷ For Arendt, this “Archimedean point” allows us to see what we are doing, “not as activities of any kind but as processes”²²⁸ – leaving activity as process is dangerous because it removes man from the world in the sense that such a view “removes the time honoured protective dividing line between nature and the human world.”²²⁹ That is, the reduction of human activity to mere process is a reduction to an impersonal machine-like activity; it is reductive to a technological process rather than a phenomenon effecting individuals. Real action is not simply a process, but involves thinking or the use of imagination if it is to become a real beginning and manifest human freedom. The Archimedean point of scientific imagination reveals the plurality of life and makes problematic technological determinations of life’s processes. This criticism of the scientific view reveals Heidegger’s influence on Arendt; however, as with Havel, there is a sense of actual engagement with the political and not the escape from the world through thinking that is found in Heidegger’s thought. Arendt is solely concerned with political action. There isn’t a sense that scientific thinking must run its course without critique.

I read Arendt to mean that the use of imagination is an action which releases humanity from processes. That is the application of imagination is a return to action as *praxis* instead of *techne* as it allows man to be the beginning which is intrinsic to human freedom. Thinking, in the Heideggerian sense of the word, engages with the world as a pluralistic entity because life revealed as pluralistic process necessarily entails engagement with others. An other is required for there to be a plurality of processes. Thinking aimed at understanding is linked to action, since actions necessarily involved

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 11.

²²⁸ Ibid 322.

²²⁹ Ibid.

with thinking by an individual about engaging with other individuals. Thought then is intrinsically linked to deeds. Acting on thought creates a viable community of ideas, which conflict with each other, creating relations. Through the temporary consensus of many wills, true political power is achieved.²³⁰ Returning to the idea of the Archimedean point and its relation to thought, thought without deeds is thought removed from the world. It has no power and is therefore detrimental to the human condition. Conversely, action without thought is detrimental because it lacks that revelatory characteristic that is essential to thought engaged with human affairs - understanding.

For Arendt, science in the modern era has strived for an Archimedean point by which to value and understand the world.²³¹ But it has lost its grounding in the world by obtaining a universal viewpoint. She cites the invention of the telescope as a move beyond the world to such a universal vantage, as the instrument heightens humanity's senses to sense beyond the world.

But the action of the scientists, since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence.²³²

Arendt is concerned about the temporal and spatially significant nature of human action. Hence the universal view of science is not the most politically useful one. She is not propounding a philosophy of transcendence of the human situation, nor does she

²³⁰ As opposed to tyrannical power which substitutes violence for power.

²³¹ Arendt *Human condition*, 322.

²³² Ibid 324.

propound a timeless and universal knowledge. Instead, human thought must relate to the specificity of the human condition grounded in the world. Such a view of the role of philosophy in engaging with public affairs is key to an understanding of Patočka.

One essential difference that I wish to spell out between the two thinkers lies in their conception of politics. Arendt uses the phenomenon of natality to describe political action whereas Patočka is darker in the tone of his terminology. For Patočka ‘strife’ or ‘struggle’ are what create new political situations. In the final Heretical Essay, Patočka writes that the human condition in the twentieth century is a condition of war.²³³

Exploring the phenomenon of the front line in World War One, Patočka is fascinated by the stripping away of everyday concerns that engaging in battle at the front line represented.²³⁴ There is significant meaning in the violence of the front line for Patočka and this has caused many critics to look unkindly on Patočka as an advocate of violence. I will read against this view, but engagement with specific critics must come later in this chapter. Patočka is fascinated by the proximity of death, which he terms “the night” in the experience of the front. The complete disregard for any social status quo that the front line soldier has transforms the world. A building is not a dwelling, but a shelter, a means of survival, something against the status quo. In other words, war is transformative. But does that mean that Patočka is an advocate of violence? I do not believe so.

Patočka contends that the Second World War shifted the experience of the front line from trenches and a clearly marked battle front to the private lives of every individual. Technological innovations allowed bombings to occur from great distances and therefore the front is much more difficult to define. Patočka also argues that at the end of military

²³³ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 119-137

²³⁴ Ibid 125.

action in World War Two, the war remained – that is with demobilization, a demobilized state of war remains. The front shifts at the end of the War to economics.

The gigantic work of economic renewal, the unheard-of, even undreamed-of social achievement which blossomed in a Europe excluded from world history, shows that this continent has opted for demobilization because it has no other option. That contributes to the deepening of the gap between the blessed haves and those who are dying of hunger on a planet rich in energy – thus intensifying the state of war.²³⁵

Patočka, in a negative eschatological reading, sees Europe as on a path to a terrible condition. The fighting might have finished but another less immediately obvious violence is still being acted out, transforming, and uprooting Europe. Patočka continues:

Helplessness, the inability to win in a war conceived from the point of view of peace, are clearly evident among the erstwhile masters of the world. To shift matters to economics is a short-term, short sighted deception because it is part of demobilisation even where it mobilizes armies of workers, researchers, and engineers: all are subject to the crack of the whip.²³⁶

The modern soldier, or front line combatant, lives in a front missing the whirl of shells and mortar, but is equally coerced into an “enslavement to life.”²³⁷ The fear of war maintains the peaceful war, appealing to man’s cynical desire to possess and to live. For

²³⁵ Ibid, 132.

²³⁶ Ibid 132-133.

²³⁷ Ibid 133.

Patočka, the sad state of affairs in late socialist Czechoslovakia is a result of this unwillingness to sacrifice or risk the status quo. It is a result of this war that peace is used as a form of unfreedom.²³⁸

To get out of this predicament Patočka does not advocate a violent destruction of the status quo. Instead he invokes the “solidarity of the shaken”²³⁹ which is the solidarity of those individuals that recognise the transformative nature of those who risk the status quo – who confront the night and put “mere life” into conflict. Conflict here is Heraclitus’ strife, or the *agon* mentioned in Chapter 1, and is not necessarily as physical violence. Those who realise the inevitability of death will act, not out of a fear of dying, but in understanding. By ‘understanding’ Patočka means fusing knowledge with action. I think that Patočka’s shaken are dissidents. They are those willing to sacrifice themselves in a meaningful way to create a rupture with the status quo – to give a vision of another possibility or way that is not the passive acceptance of the status quo. I think that Patočka saw himself as involved with the solidarity of the shaken when he authored charter 77. Writing that document was an act of violence, in a peaceful war, that was Patočka’s front line experience, as mere life is rejected in favour of meaningful action. What is significant here is that tied to the transformative nature of political action is the willingness to be sacrificed, the willingness to face death. This need not be the willingness to do violence.

Throughout this thesis I make comparisons between Arendt and Havel, but I want to draw attention here to this specific difference. Havel is, as will be spelled out later in this

238 Patočka is not explicit about referring the Heretical Essays to the state of affairs in his land but is thinking about the general affairs of Europe. I find it hard not to read a specificity towards Czechoslovakia however, as the willingness to maintain the status quo, despite the mobilization of the citizen to be a participant in socialism, is a far more obvious example of what Patočka is talking about than in liberal democracies in Western Europe. It would be interesting to take the reading outside of Czechoslovakia and see if the analysis holds for The U.S.A. and Europe as well; but I don’t have the space or time to do so in this thesis.

239 Patočka *Heretical Essays*, 134.

chapter, orientated towards this “solidarity of the shaken” rather than the idea of natality. This is a key point of divergence between Havel and Patočka, and Arendt.

Patočka, Havel and History

For Patočka, it is through ‘thinking’ the world that the philosopher attains a distanced view of the processes of life and is charged with the responsibility to make that view problematic. Philosophy is the means by which Being relates to humanity. Thinking philosophically is presenting Being to consciousness as a problem – something to be resolved. Thinking philosophically also means stepping out of a particular historicity, a task that Husserl’s phenomenology allows. This stepping out of history aids the search for the problematicity of the world.²⁴⁰ Writing against historical materialism (which would have been the only acceptable view of history under socialist conditions in Czechoslovakia) Patočka contends that history requires an openness to Being, in order to aid in what he terms ‘becoming’. For Patočka, becoming is the continual struggle against what is given to remain open to Being. In a Heideggerian move, Patočka writes that the task of philosophy is to unconceal.²⁴¹ Every phenomenon’s manifestation is linked to its concealment, and phenomenology brings its essence into unconcealment.²⁴²

If it is to be helpful in the task of revealing what is concealed, history, as a process, needs to be understood in terms of three movements of human life: acceptance, defence and truth. Acceptance consists of the “human need to be accepted and introduced into the world” – in other words the desire to fit in. Defense consists of the working against death. That is we protect ourselves through work. Hence the first two movements are

²⁴⁰ The term problematicity is used by Patočka in the eighth lecture from *Plato and Europe*.

²⁴¹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 8-10.

²⁴² Ibid.

related since the former involves exposing ourselves to the world to be part of it (as that throwness of being), and the other involves reproducing life through toil and work.

Patočka says the following in describing the importance of work:²⁴³

Work is essentially this self-disposal of ourselves as being at the disposal of others; it has its source in the factual dependence of life on itself which is precisely what makes life an ontological metaphor. It is not possible to *be*, that is, to carry out the onset into the universe of individual things, without the movement of acceptance and self surrender... As soon as we become links in the chain of acceptance, we are *eo ipso* potential participants in work; already the child prepares for it; this preparation is already incipient work.²⁴⁴

In the throwness of life, being confronts death and works as a means of reproducing life, thereby escaping death temporarily. Through work, meaning is given to the world in the sense that a person is reduced to the social role known through acceptance, and works within that role, bearing the inescapable burden of work instead of death. That is, “if we want to live, we have no choice”²⁴⁵ – we must work.

The third movement Patočka identifies is the most human movement, the movement of truth. This is the movement of life transcending the world of work and everydayness. This is the movement where life opens to Being, bringing Being into unconcealment. This is done by challenging the bedrock of the world of the second movement. A confrontation with death leads to a confrontation with the particulars of existence. This movement is only possible because of the inherent concept of freedom in the second world of

²⁴³ Note the similarity to Arendt’s notion of work as producing beyond the immediate needs of the self.

²⁴⁴ Patočka *Heretical Essays* ,31.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

defence. The individual can confront the given, and confront death. By substituting acceptance with strife²⁴⁶ a freedom is realised with which to confront the thrown state of being and attain the Heideggerian condition of authenticity.

Essentially, the movement of truth uncovers the natural world that has been lost through the passive acceptance of the movement of defence. Hence there is a strong relationship between the movement of defence and the movement of truth. Thus history, understood by Patočka, is the unfolding of the three movements with the movement of truth being the highest attainment for humanity. Truth, for Patočka, is not the universal attainment of Being, but rather the continual strife between what is concealed and an openness to Being – in other words, it is becoming. This is why philosophy is so important for Patočka. Philosophy, as it was for Plato, is about recovering a sense of wonder at the world. It makes problematic the world of particulars, and when through a conflict with the world of particulars a search for meaning is undertaken, history begins.

The task of philosophy is not, as Plato thought, to supply a metaphysical certainty (the world of ideas) to the problem of the natural world. It is to continually struggle, as Socrates demonstrated in his ceaseless questioning of Athenians. This is not a rejection of metaphysics. As Peter Lom notes, metaphysics is inescapable for Patočka because moral judgements are inescapable and every moral judgement has a metaphysical component; however, for Patočka, philosophy's real task is not to describe metaphysics, but to describe the problematicity of Being.²⁴⁷

Philosophy lies in the "freedom of the *polis*"²⁴⁸ because the movement for truth can only be realised within a polis where the individual is in a relationship with others and has therefore a given situation to question. Patočka, with Arendt, finds the origin of work

246 Patočka quotes Heraclitus' maxim that *polemos* is the father of all things. Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 42.

247 Lom "Rorty and Patočka" 451 & 453.

248 Kohák *Jan Patočka*, 123.

in the family.²⁴⁹ Life, recreating life in the face of death, produces a family unit to reach beyond the individual's life through the reproductive process and through the memory of others. One does not live one's life merely for oneself, but exists in a family unit and then in a polis, for others. A free polis is a polis that is open to encourage *polemos* between individuals – not violence but strife. In other words, a free polis allows Socrates to question, and the consequent situation of the political is the result of this strife. Free individuals questioning the relationship between the given and the concealed, produce a support for life which encourages greater improvement and better manifestation of the movement of truth. Political action is action that does not have the safety of the movement of defence.

Such life does not seek to escape its contingency, but neither does it yield to it passively; since it has glimpsed the possibility of authentic life, that is, life as a whole, the world opens itself to it for the first time – it is no longer merely an involuntary background against which that which concerns us shows itself; rather, it itself can now stand forth, as a whole of that which opens up against a black backdrop of closed night. This whole now speaks to humans directly, free of the muting effect of tradition and myth, only by it do they seek to be accepted and held responsible.²⁵⁰

There are some evocative phrases in this passage which need spelling out. The “black backdrop of closed night” is Patočka’s invocation of an understanding of life as a life towards death. The meaning of a life is not merely in its life, but also in its finitude.

Political acts “shake” the given, as they appear through myth and tradition, and open up

²⁴⁹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 37-38

²⁵⁰, Ibid, 39.

new possibilities. In politics, “everything is cast in a new light.”²⁵¹ With such a view of history, and with the role of philosophy to bring to light the problemacy of the given, the heretical part of the heretical essays is clear. Patočka engages in a philosophical analysis of western history to show where particular motifs have clouded the course of history and concealed truth from the participants in those events.

In *Plato and Europe*, Patočka writes that the problem that Europe then faced was that elite power has disappeared and that consequently Europe “has stopped believing in itself, that it had completely accepted the standards and ways of life of its inheritors.”²⁵² It is possible to read too much into the use of the word ‘elite’ – as Tucker does in his chapter on Patočka’s conception of history. I think that there is a clear Nietzschean influence on Patočka here which leads him to praise the individual or society that struggles for authenticity. This is not, as Tucker presents it, an indication that Patočka is angry and critical of the peasant origins of Czech nationalism, and thus led to lament the lack of noble ideas which strive for greatness through war.²⁵³

Tucker writes,

Patočka ridiculed Czech nationalism as provincial and petty, leading to the tragedies of 1938 and, by implication, 1968 as well. Patočka was sober and lucid in his criticism of Czech nationalism and its contribution to the ethnic disunity of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Some of his less enlightening criticisms of the Czech nation originated from a sense of inferiority in comparison with what he perceived as a superior German civilization.²⁵⁴

251 Ibid.

252 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 151

253 Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 89-114.

254 Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 94.

Tucker continues on to write that whereas nations like America and Russia and Germany had great motivations driving their expansion, the Czech's interests were driven in a purely provincial direction of a liberated peasant society.²⁵⁵ Tucker, who in the previous chapter of the book gave a clear and thorough summation of the *Heretical Essays*, makes no mention of the theory from that work in his explication of Patočka's view on Czech history. This is a shame because the whole point of that work is to describe the problems with substituting ecstatic goals for authentic ones. Napoleon might have been bent on expanding the French empire through war and bloodshed. That does not mean, however, that the deaths through war are justifiable by the 'elite and noble' goal of empire expansion. Instead, the *extasis* of war and expansion is simply the obverse of passive acceptance of a social order. Authenticity lies through philosophy, not through war. Indeed Patočka will go so far as to say that they are the different manifestations of the same war.²⁵⁶

Kohák, in his intellectual biography of Patočka, warns against making interpretations of Patočka like those of Tucker.²⁵⁷ The idea of responsibility in freedom which permeates Patočka's work, according to Kohák, must be taken into consideration when evaluating the authenticity or merits of a historical phenomenon.²⁵⁸ The *polemos* that Patočka promotes is not war—he is clear enough in his condemnation of war in the *Heretical Essays*—instead the better word is strife. Strife with ideology creates the freedom for openness to Being. Patočka is propounding a philosophy of transcendence, not an ecstatic embracement of the mundane that is war and empire expansion. By this I mean that the claim that the political system and its mundane concerns is worthy human

²⁵⁵ Ibid 98.

²⁵⁶ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 134.

²⁵⁷ Kohák's work was published before Tucker's, I write 'like Tucker' as the interpretation that Kohák warns against is exactly what Tucker supplies.

²⁵⁸ Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 129.

action does not lend transcendence to acts of war. An imperial act is based in a faith in empire, not in truth. Like Plato and Arendt, Patočka believes that engagement with truth is a political activity. Tearing down the structures of an ideology might remove the cave walls; however one is then given the task of rebuilding an authentic and open society. In the *Heretical Essays* Patočka calls for establishment of a community of the shaken.²⁵⁹ This is why, according to Kohák, the *Heretical Essays* were so influential on Czech dissidents. Essential to undertaking the transcendence of ideology is the notion of responsibility—in Platonic terms, returning to the cave. Members of communities, rather than warring violently with each other, have a responsibility of ensuring that the space of interaction with each other and each other's ideas remains open.

The influence of this responsibility to create and maintain a free public political sphere is clear throughout Havel's writing. An obvious example is the open letter sent to Alexander Dubcek in 1969. Facing the invasion of Soviet forces to put a halt to 'socialism with a human face,' Havel implores Dubcek to follow the path of truth and resist the Soviets. Havel plays on the idea of a free polis and hints that Dubcek, as President, has a responsibility to ensure its survival because only in a free polis can one be totally human through the struggle for life in truth.

Patočka Plato & Havel

Edward Findlay writes on the Platonic element to Patočka's conception of freedom.²⁶⁰ Plato is criticised by Patočka for attempting to supply a dogmatic metaphysics as an answer to the human condition and Patočka praises Plato for describing the ground from which metaphysical thinking could spring. The central figure of Socrates is a role model –

²⁵⁹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 135.

²⁶⁰ Edward Findlay "Politics, Metaphysics and Anti-Foundationalism in The Works of Eric Voegelin and Jan Patočka" in ed. Peter Petrakis & Cecil Eubanks, *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns; Searching for foundations*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 161.

one who we might say embodies Patočka's responsible politics of freedom. The oracle at Delphi had inscribed above the entrance the maxim 'know thyself'. As Findlay points out, for the logical positivists, active in Patočka's time, this would involve looking for an "external experience" to describe self-knowledge.²⁶¹ For Socrates, there also needs to be an openness to the experience of 'we are'. This is fundamentally an experience of freedom as an experience of Being - not diluted nor determined by mundane concerns, but illuminated by freedom and openness to Being. Findlay writes, "Socratic knowledge (or ignorance) is absolutely free; the philosopher frees himself from the material and objective limitations to which interlocutors remain bound and can thus master them in the course of the dialectic."²⁶² Challenging objectivity in the natural world in order to unconceal Being might be seen to have religious connotations, as Patočka is advocating a philosophy of transcendence. Yet this is not the case. Patočka was not religious.²⁶³ As Kohák points out, religion is just another objectivism that philosophy needs to overcome.²⁶⁴

Instead of searching for a positive answer to the question of Being, Patočka propounds a continuous negativity. That is a continuous questioning of what is given. Freedom is only realised with a questioning of determining modes of thought. This position, which seeks to emulate the example of Socrates rather than the metaphysics of Plato, is termed negative Platonism.²⁶⁵ The doctrine of negative Platonism is best explained in Patočka's 'Negative Platonism'. In later works, such as the *Heretical Essays*,

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid 162

²⁶³ Kohák writes that Patočka was almost persuaded to take the step of conversion, yet he never did. He is not dismissive of religion as he sees in religion, and also in art, a kind of thinking which hints at transcendence, yet, unlike philosophy, the transcendence still leaves one with a perceived objectivity that is an obverse to passive acceptance of the mundane. See Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 17.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Jan Patočka, "Negative Platonism" trans Erazim Kohák, in Erazim Kohák, Jan Patočka; *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 180.

and *Plato and Europe*, Patočka does not mention the term. However, the concept of continuous strife with what is given is maintained and Patočka attempts to assimilate it into a phenomenology of world history. The specifics of reading Plato as a negative philosophy are not carried over into Havel's writings, however we do find in them the basic tenant of continuous strife against ideology. Hence my earlier claim about the impracticality of claiming that Havel is influenced by a specific text or idea.

Reading Plato negatively does not entail a complete rejection of Platonism. The Platonic taming of the orgiastic practices of Greek tragedy and religion are replaced with a care for the soul, manifested in the soul's search for truth. Patočka contends that Plato tames the orgiastic (the demonic,) with responsibility – responsibility demonstrated in the return to the cave. Derrida writes that Patočka is presenting philosophy as the incorporation of orgiastic mystery with Platonic responsibility. For Derrida, responsibility is an authenticity that confronts death. That is, the responsible individual necessarily confronts their own mortality in order to be authentic. Derrida cites Patočka's use of the word 'conversion' to describe turning one's gaze, with Plato's philosophy, towards the Good.²⁶⁶ This conversion is very important because it entails an appropriation of Platonic philosophy, which appropriates that which preceded it—orgiastic mystery. That is, that the turn towards Plato, keeps what preceded Plato. I mention this because when considering negative Platonism, it is vital not to simply to see it as a philosophy of questioning. Instead Patočka intends to promote the *polemos* of Socrates with the Athenian state as the assimilation of the practices of the Athenian state with Socrates' mode of life and Socrates death. Transcendence within Negative Platonism is not pure. That is, throughout negative Platonism, engagement with the world of things remains. In Plato, the transcendence of the world of appearance to the world of ideas is total. Derrida is

266 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 2nd Ed, trans. David Wills, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 10

correct to stress that Patočka's negative Platonism concerns a responsibility to the world of ideas that assimilates with the world of things, or as he terms it, the demonic. Hence, rather than losing the self to the orgiastic, negative Platonism is an interior dialogue of the soul. The individual remains grounded throughout the transcendence of philosophy.

If we take the central idea of negative Platonism to be a rejection of the world of ideas and an affirmation of the calling of the question of Being that is the siren song to the philosopher, then it is safe to say that Havel, whilst not engaging with Platonic texts, affirms Patočka's concept. Havel's allegory of the greengrocer, described in previous chapters, is reminiscent of Patočka's re-reading of Plato. The greengrocer is not charged with the task of remaking society, or organising a revolution. Instead he is charged with the task of critically analysing his involvement in ideological processes and removing himself from those processes once identified. This is a Socratic birth of the self. Patočka and Havel are better viewed as Socratic thinkers rather than as metaphysicians. They both aim at bridging the gap between theory and *praxis*. It is useless to interpret Patočka's philosophy as a distant or unengaged phenomenology or a removed philosophy of history. Instead, the truth that Patočka claims is the target of philosophical reasoning is useless unless a philosopher strives for that target. Similarly, with Havel, philosophy is useless if it is not grounded in an attempt to recover the question of Being - or as Havel would write - a life in truth.

Patočka clearly finds in Socrates the example of life in openness to Being. The continual questioning of the given state of affairs is the fullest example of human freedom according to Patočka's philosophy. In *Ideology and Life in the Idea*, Patočka writes,

Socrates... contemplates about what is good, with the result that he does not state the Good (on the contrary, the definition simply stating what the good is

somehow continuously eludes his contemplation), but that he becomes good
– that the Good is established in life and in thinking itself.²⁶⁷

Socrates then exemplifies a life in struggle for truth. There is no need for a clear definition of truth or a metaphysics of truth. Truth is only meaningful in the struggle for it. Eric Manton notes that this leads Patočka to the following position on freedom. Freedom, unlike the standard liberal conception of freedom as innate, or as Manton puts it “freedom by default”²⁶⁸, instead exists in the struggle for it.

Suffering plays a major part in Patočka’s philosophy. Suffering for freedom is authentic living. Patočka’s own attempt to emulate Socrates questioning and call for authentic living is best found in his authorship of the charter 77 document. Charter 77 will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters but a small note is necessary here. The Charter 77 document was a document calling for the respecting of the freedoms and rights outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the socialist government had signed up to. Both of these documents have freedom as their central aims in the form of freedom of expression, education, and freedom from fear and other liberal freedoms. Patočka saw in the failure of the Government to actualise the policies that these covenants propounded, a need to highlight the world of appearances that the ideology was providing. As a result, Patočka, Havel and other notable signatories were detained by authorities. After a lengthy interrogation Patočka died. The significance of his death is that it is in line with the dictates of his philosophy. The martyrdom of Patočka for Charter 77 could be seen as a Socratic defence of a life in truth. Havel at

267 Jan Patočka, “Ideology and Life in the Idea,” *Studia Phenomenologica* VII (2007): 93.

268 Eric Manton, “Patočka on Ideology and the politics of human Freedom,” *Studia Phenomenologica* VII (2007): 473.

least took it that way, incorporating the idea of suffering for a life in truth into his own thought.

If we consider the cave allegory from Plato's *The Republic*, we see the idea of suffering/struggling. Initially, when the prisoner is turned to face the fire inside the cave there is a painful struggle for recognition. Then there is a greater struggle when faced with the light of the outside world at the cave's exit.²⁶⁹ Implicit is also the struggle to move on to the next stage of the allegory—that is the struggle to cease watching the world of things and inquire into the sun's visage. Then there is the struggle to behold the sun; then another struggle when returning to the cave's darkness; then again a struggle when attempting to convey the world outside the cave to the other prisoners. For Plato, as for Patočka and Havel, the idea of truth is intrinsically linked to the struggle for it. The struggle of returning to the cave is synonymous with the political struggle for freedom. The political is the state of permanent uprootedness as it is the state that struggles to stare at the fires of contingency. The moment the essence of the political is set up, humanity has again succumbed to the shadows on the cave wall. As Darian Meacham points out, Patočka leaves the political as this permanent state of openness, or struggling against the given.²⁷⁰ Individuals, in their struggle for freedom, make a space in which the struggle against each other can be played out—the political. It is constantly being remade through individuals struggling with and against each other for authentic expression.

This philosophy of suffering also has a link to the philosophy of Karl Jaspers. In the *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, Jaspers' makes clear the importance of the example of Socrates in much the same way as Patočka. For Jaspers', Socrates struggled against

269 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Sir Desmond Lee, (Harmondsworth; Penguin Books, 1987), 255-264.

270 Darian Meacham, "The Body at the Front; Corporeity and Community in Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*," *Studia Phenomenologica* VII (2007):353-376.

demonology²⁷¹ in order to pursue the divine (eternal,) call to Truth.²⁷² The philosopher, for Jaspers', (and note the similarity in Patočka and Havel here,) is constantly in a struggle to apprehend eternal truth which is eternally unattainable. Truth is in an eternal state of becoming. Hence, rather than looking to the future for authentic being there is a responsibility, through philosophy, to realise the present.²⁷³ A sacrifice of one's life for truth is for Patočka an attempt to realise truth in the present moment. Both Tucker & Kohák agree that Jaspers and Patočka, on the theme of sacrifice, make for a worthwhile comparison. Kohák, as the biographer of Patočka, writes that Patočka was reading Jaspers in 1934 and Kohák notes the similarity in their themes.²⁷⁴, ²⁷⁵ Tucker writes,

Patočka resembles Socrates of the *Phaedo*. In his negative-Platonic way, Patočka reached conclusions similar to those of Plato's Socrates. Socrates longed to free his soul of his body to dwell with the ideas. Patočka was looking for a transforming experience of Sacrifice to liberate him of everydayness and beings, to be reunited with being.²⁷⁶

On Tucker's view, Patočka sought, in terms of Jasper's philosophy, to become more aware of his existenz, or limitless freedom of his being, through a confrontation with pain. This is a remarkably strong statement from Tucker, and I'm not entirely in agreement with it. What I will assert, however, is that Patočka's authorship of the Charter 77

271 By demonology, or demons, Jaspers' meant the irrational, or the unconscious, or the world of appearances taken as eternal truth.

272 Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (London; Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD, 1950), 129

273 Ibid 151.

274 Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 18.

275 Tucker, *The Philosophy of Czech Dissidence*, 36

276 Ibid 85.

document and his death after interrogation provides a Socratic example from which conclusions like Tucker's can be drawn. Whether it was Patočka's intention to seek out pain or not, Havel, like a young Plato at the death of Socrates, finds a strength to continue with philosophy because of the vision of authentic life provided by the perceived sacrifice of Patočka.

That Patočka was interested in sacrifice is not in question. Derrida asks, in *The Gift of Death*:

How does one give [death] to oneself in the sense that putting oneself to death means dying while assuming responsibility for one's own death, committing suicide but also sacrificing oneself for another, dying for the other, thus perhaps giving one's life by giving oneself death, accepting the gift of death, such as Socrates, Christ and others did in so many different ways. And perhaps Patočka in his own way?²⁷⁷

Philosophy, as Derrida describes it in *The Gift of Death*, is a vigil over death, awareness of death and a confrontation with death. The concern for death creates the *polemos* through which freedom comes into being. Derrida describes freedom as the concern for death.²⁷⁸ The turning to face death, characteristic of philosophy, for Patočka, represents a triumph over death.²⁷⁹ The triumph lies in the confrontation as life runs away from death, in the Heideggerian sense. Responsibility thus entails a rupture with the normal. A dissent against authority²⁸⁰ to bring about this confrontation and, as in the example of

²⁷⁷ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 10

²⁷⁸ Ibid 15.

²⁷⁹ Patočka, in Derrida *Gift of Death*, 16.

²⁸⁰ Derrida, *Gift of Death* 27.

the *Phaedo*, the knowledge of death can become a gift to oneself. That is one can, to confront death, give death to oneself.

My purpose in introducing Derrida's interpretation of the giving of death in Patočka, and its relation to a sacrifice of life, is to illustrate a concurrence of Havel's thought with Patočka's. Despite Derrida's re-working of Patočka's ideas, the themes Derrida illustrates are Patočka's and are also present in Havel. In *Letters to Olga*, Havel writes that death is a provocation capable of mobilizing and arousing, which in part goes with Patočka's thought. Even more strongly connected to Patočka's thought, is the idea of giving oneself a gift of death as a means of dissent.²⁸¹ This does not translate to a glorification of suicide. Instead, the gift of death can be a giving to oneself a confrontation with death, a rupture with life. As Havel writes, "without the awareness of death, nothing like the 'meaning of life' could exist, and human life would therefore have nothing human in it."²⁸² The confrontation with death, for Havel as for Patočka, is a triumph over death - a living despite the inevitability of death. That authentic relation to death, which Derrida calls freedom, gives life its meaning. Transcendence is only possible with the gift of death.

Patočka's Critique of Ideology and the Influence of that Critique on Havel

One of the hallmarks of Patočka's philosophy of history is his insistence that all major ideologies of the twentieth century, which are seemingly the result of conflict between different ideologies, found root in the same idea. They all provide a deterministic theory of man which cannot encapsulate the totality of man.²⁸³ It is not the specificity of Nazism which brings it into conflict with the specificity of liberal democracy. The conflict arises

²⁸¹ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 240

²⁸² Ibid 240

²⁸³ This is the theme of the 6th Essay of the *Heretical Essays*.

from the workings of the ideology to prevail. The *telos* of ideology is to succeed. Ideology works by substituting the ideological interpretation of man for the concept of a free human being. For Patočka, the idea of man is constant; the only change is in man's historical situation. The historical situation is the shoreline which obstructs a clear view towards the horizon of Being. Ideology conflates an historical situation with the idea of man. In Patočka's essay *Ideology and Life in the Idea* the mortal nature of ideology is contrasted with the immortal nature of the idea of human freedom. I am reminded of Rousseau's opening to *The Social Contract*, "man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains."²⁸⁴ The effect of ideology is obviously to incarcerate the free individual by removing the faculty of philosophy which brings the question of Being into focus, in favour of materialistic and deterministic conceptions of human nature. The only difference between ideologies is their historicity; in essence they are the same thing.

Havel's famous essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, draws heavily on Patočka's critique of ideology explained above. Consider the following passage by Havel:

Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality.²⁸⁵

And compare this to a passage from Patočka:

284 Jean-Jacques Rousseau "The Social Contract" in *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Susan Dunn, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 150.

285 Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, 30

The concept of Man is a theory about him, a theory that can stand alongside other theories; it is a theory since it does not engage us. Such a concept can become myth or ideology which does engage, which accommodates those of our tendencies, needs and forces which lay dormant in us so as to lead, direct and draw them together for the needs of social action.

Nevertheless, ideology, although it engages, conceptually grasps, and binds us, it seizes Man externally, as certain forces in the overall complex of forces.²⁸⁶

Patočka finds myth to be important. He writes, in *Platonism and Politics*, that myth is for those whom can not or will not practice philosophy.²⁸⁷ Myth binds people to action. However without philosophical motives, myth (or what has become ideology due to the lack of philosophical motivation,) becomes a prison for the self. Both thinkers share the same view of the relationship between ideology and conceptualising the human condition. The similarity is of course, to be expected; Patočka is the key influence on Havel's thought.

Findlay claims that Havel's thought can only be considered in light of Patočka's work.²⁸⁸ He also criticises Havel for not being the rigorous philosopher that Patočka was. For Findlay, there is no political philosophy in Havel's works; there is just a spattering of themes which resonate with political readers.²⁸⁹ I think this is unfair to Havel. There is a key difference between Havel's and Patočka's critique of ideology which separates Havel and delineates him as an original thinker, is the removal of the philosophy of history from Patočka's critique of ideology. The crucial question driving Patočka's critique of ideology,

286 Jan Patočka, "Ideology and Life in the Idea," *Studia Phenomenologica* VII (2007): 89-90

287 Patočka, "Platonism and Politics," 343.

288 Findlay, "Classical Ethics," 403.

289 Ibid 404.

as is well noted by Derrida, is “why does [Europe] suffer from ignorance of its history, from a failure to assume its responsibility, that is, the memory of its history as history of responsibility?” The *Heretical Essays* aim to give a philosophical explanation to the problems of historicity from Patočka’s view that historicity removes the possibility of man being a historical construction. The *Heretical Essays* are heretical precisely because they remove the historical determination of man from history. On the other hand, Havel, whilst sharing Patočka’s Heideggerian conception of Being, does not share Patočka’s valuation of the philosophy of history. Instead, Havel’s philosophy is markedly more dissident. Where Patočka elaborates on the historical concealing of Being, Havel elaborates on the possibility of uncovering in the present. In his essay to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Prague Spring, *Farce, Reformability, and the Future of the World*, (rather than describing the historical formulations of it,) Havel explains the historical attempts to disrupt ideology. Rather than explaining the Hungarian Revolution, Prague Spring, Khrushchev’s thaw (etc.) as separate historical occurrences, Havel contends that they represent a single historical trend towards the natural state of diversity, uniqueness and autonomy.²⁹⁰ Havel is concerned with history in so far as history can explain the attempt to ground an openness to Being in a particular present. The question of Europe’s identity from the perspective of the philosophy of history is not Havel’s concern.²⁹¹ Hence Havel’s philosophy departs from Patočka’s in the scope of their concern. The analysis of history which informs Patočka’s critique of ideology is not present in Havel. That does not mean that Havel disagrees with Patočka; instead, Havel frames his thought differently.

Havel’s thought is no less dense than Patočka’s for this lack of historical analysis. Instead, Havel directs his thought directly against the contemporary Czech and world

²⁹⁰ Havel, *Open Letters*, 360.

²⁹¹ Havel, especially Havel the politician, is very interested in the identity of Europe, however, only in so far as Europe can be made to be an open society encouraging diversity and freedom. He is a supporter of the EU and European integration.

situation. Whereas the call to dissent is barely explicit in Patočka (who couched in strict explication of the phenomenological method,) Havel is much more practical than Patočka. Havel directs his writing explicitly at whatever situation is most concerning to him. For example, in *Plato and Europe*, Patočka elaborates at length on a phenomenological analysis of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, discussing ways in which the political example of Socrates represents a life that is open to Being. The life that Patočka espouses is then, due to his phenomenological distancing from the historical situation, a life for all times. Socrates' life is an example for us. Patočka's concern for life under totalitarian communism in Czechoslovakia is displayed through his presentation of the timeless way to live in openness to Being. Havel, on the other hand, does not need to hide his concern for the Czech situation. Havel is not a strict phenomenologist—hence he is not corrupting the phenomenological method in writing open letters to Czech leaders or writing essays on dissident events immediately as they happen. In short, Havel grounds his philosophy in an analysis of the present. Jean Bethke Elshtain writes that Havel's philosophy represents an answer to a crisis in responsibility.

A crisis in responsibility (the “intrinsic responsibility that man has to and for the world”) is a crisis in human identity and human integrity. To assume “full responsibility” is not to lapse into dour moralism, nor to universalise a kind of giddy and boundaryless compassion, but to take up the very specific and concrete burdens of one's time and place.²⁹²

This is a fair description of Havel's answer to a crisis of responsibility. It is interesting that writing on how the post-totalitarian regime came to power in Czechoslovakia, Havel

292 Elshtain “A Man for this Season,” 210.

writes to deplore how individuals are being made to be concerned about ideology rather than being properly concerned about the natural world. The focus is not on the genealogy of totalitarianism, the focus is on the present. This is a Patočkan idea. Nevertheless it is Havel's take on Patočka's thought, not a parrot version of it.

There is an extra element in Havel's philosophy which is not present in the thought of Patočka and is yet linked to the critique of ideology. It is the idea of the absurd. The absurd enters Havel's thinking through his involvement in the world of drama and through his reading of Franz Kafka. For Patočka, ideology is best described in a Platonic sense as constituting the world of appearance. Hence the real or natural world becomes the Idea. For Havel, by contrast, ideology is best described as a Kafkaesque scenario. Many of Havel's plays, such as *The Garden Party* or *The Memorandum*, are in fact critiques of ideology where the aim of the play is to instil in the audience a sense that the world around them is in fact absurd. The actors on stage, at times, are reduced to speaking babble, seemingly unaware that what they are saying to other characters makes no sense; indeed the other characters react as if what was said was perfectly reasonable. Only in the audience is the privileged onlooker (distanced from the historical situation of the stage, and yet linked to it through thinking,) able to understand that the world of the characters is false and can be overcome through thinking, through dissenting from the given world of the stage. The theme is Patočkan but it is a Havelian move.

Conclusion

Findlay is right to argue that Havel is best understood through a study of Patočka's philosophy. However, it is a mistake to think that Havel is unoriginal, as Findlay does. This chapter has explained the major themes in Patočka's work which find a place in Havel's thought. Without fully committing himself to any specific part of Patočka's

philosophy, Havel has appropriated in his writing what I would call the 'example' of Patočka. Havel shares a view of the meaning of history as an opening to Being that Patočka propounds, whilst not engaging with the historical explanation of that openness (or concealedness) through the history of philosophy. Havel shares the critique of ideology present in Patočka's thought, while adding to it the concept of the absurd that is taken from Havel's engagement with drama and Kafka. Havel also critiques ideology in the present; his thought is much more directed to the contemporary than Patočka's and that is a deliberate move away from his thought. The next chapter will further delve into some of Patočka's major themes and explore their influence on Havel.

Chapter 4: Further Explorations of a Patočkean Thread in Havel's Writing

Introduction

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of Jan Patočka's influence on Havel's thought, this chapter will investigate the influence of Patočka's theory of negative Platonism and explore how some of the themes that arise in a discussion of negative Platonism can be used to appraise similar themes in Havel's work. Johan Arnason's paper "*The Idea of Negative Platonism*," will be a key text in this discussion. I further explore some of the points made by Arnason and add to the discussion by examining some of Patočka's later thoughts, found in his collection of informal lectures, *Plato and Europe*, his essay 'Negative Platonism' and the *Heretical Essays*. As I argued in Chapter 3, Jan Patočka's philosophy is the strongest influence on Havel. Chapter 3 introduced the idea of negative Platonism and briefly touched on the argument of the *Heretical Essays* and in this chapter I want to take that analysis further. I want to explore negative Platonism, and its later incarnations in Patočka's thought in the context of Patočka's project of an asubjective phenomenology.

Asubjective Phenomenology

Patočka had difficulty with Husserl's notion of the *epoche*.²⁹³ I cannot give a full account of Patočka's asubjective phenomenology because currently the main papers by

²⁹³ The epoche is the imaginative exercise of suspending from position taking when considering phenomenon, combined with reducing the critique of phenomenon to its essences. The epoche reveals the life world through its reductions to the transcendental ego to which the life world appears.

Patočka which treat with this break with Husserlian phenomenology are not available in English. However, enough scholarship exists for me to make a useful comment on the issue.

Findlay writes that Patočka borrowed from his mentor Edmund Husserl the idea that the world is a universal that is given phenomenologically; but at the same time, Patočka rejects the reduction of the world to the transcendental subject.²⁹⁴ Patočka's problem with the *epoche* has been neatly summarised by Ivan Chvatik, who is the director of the Patočka archives at Charles University.²⁹⁵ For Husserl, the reduction involved in the bracketing of the *epoche* stops at the transcendental ego to which the life-world appears. This is problematic to Patočka because for him the reduction can be taken further, that is to the self appearing to the self. As Ivan Rodriguez points out, "[t]he limitation of the *epoche* is due to Husserl's subjectivistic preference, which takes subjectivity as absolutely given with all its contents."²⁹⁶ Patočka wants his phenomenology to reflect on lived experience itself. Chvatik notes that as a consequence, for Patočka's asubjective phenomenology, "we no longer believe that the reflection on our lived experience gives us access to our actual experiencing."²⁹⁷ This is actually quite a Heideggerian move, as Michael Staudigl notes, for meaning, in this asubjective phenomenology, is not reducible to an achievement of the ego.²⁹⁸ Instead, for Patočka meaning is grounded in our *Being-in-the-world*.²⁹⁹

294 Findlay, *Caring for the Soul*, 27.

295 Ivan Chvatik, "Jan Patočka's Project of an Asubjective Phenomenology" (Paper presented to the conference workshop *Responsibility, Formal Knowledge and the Life-world*, Murdoch University, November 28-29, 2011), 6.

296 Ivan Rodriguez "The Relevance of Jan Patočka's Phenomenology in Questions of Science and Religion" *Pensamiento* 64, (2008): 990.

297 Chvatik "Asubjective Phenomenology" 6.

298 Michael Staudigl "Destructed Meaning, Withheld World, Shattered "We": On Violence from the Viewpoint of Jan Patočka's "A-subjective Phenomenology"" in *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology: Centenary Papers*, ed. Ivan Chvatik & Erika Abrams (New York: Springer, 2011), 144.

299 Ibid.

Patočka writes that “we need to conceive of reflection as a vital act, placing it in the context of an existence on the way to itself, seeking itself, understanding itself, that is, understanding its possibilities”³⁰⁰ Construed in this way, Patočka’s phenomenology aims at an understanding of identity as that which has transcendence as a part of its very being. In other words the self is not a fixed identity, but rather a thrown being, in a specific time and place in the historical world, that constitutes itself through the search for itself.

In explaining Patočka’s understanding of human rights as those things worth sacrificing one’s life for, James Mensch confronts the seeming contradiction of Patočka’s view of rights and his asubjective phenomenology.³⁰¹ For Mensch, if there is no substantive subject then the question appears, what exactly has rights? For Mensch it is when we conceive of the soul as movement that something substantive appears which can be endowed with rights. Motion for Patočka, as Mensch describes it, is the motion of existence.³⁰² This can be fitted to Patočka’s ideas of the three movements of care for the soul outlined in *Body Community Language World*.

Having a body at our disposal is at the same time the basis of life and an understanding of its most basic possibility. In our self movement, we understand that we move a body and that its guidance depends on us. If we did not understand that, then all our higher mental life, all lived experiencing

300 Jan Patočka, *Body Community Language World*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd, (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 165-166.

301 James Mensch “Patočka’s Conception of the Subject of Human Rights” *Idealistic Studies* 41, iss ½ (Spring, 2011):1-10.

302 Ibid 9.

over and above that, would become impossible. So it is not just that movement belongs to existence, rather existence is movement.³⁰³

Patočka continues to write that movement is realization.³⁰⁴ Hence for Mensch, we can understand Patočka's defence of human rights in terms of this motion. If existence is motion, the subject is that which gives the world its appearing as the world unfolds itself through that motion.

Abstractly considered, the world is simply, in Patočka's phrase, "an open field of possibilities." What transforms these into appearing is our "I can." Thus, because I can use water to douse a fire, it can appear as such. Because, I can use it for drinking and bathing, it can also manifest these aspects. This, of course, does not mean that every possibility is open to me. Possibilities belong to the world. I cannot create them. I can only disclose them as means for my projects. Such disclosure is, however, not static. My "I can" changes with the technology available to me and, with it, the appearing of the world. Thus, I can now look through a microscope or look out of the window of a plane—possibilities that were not available in previous ages."³⁰⁵

In terms of the political space in which rights are considered, motion for Mensch is questioning, or calling into question. When the subject calls itself into question through engaging in public space, the public space is created and maintained. The being whose existence is motion in public is the subject endowed with rights.

303 Patočka, *Body, Community Language World*, 144.

304 Ibid 145.

305 Mensch "Patočka's Conception of Human Rights" 9.

Havel does not carry into his work the theme of movement which characterises Patočka's explanation of the self. I argue, though, that there is in Havel the sense that the subject is not privileged with a complete disclosure of the world. The problem of appearing that arises in Patočka's asubjective phenomenology has influenced Havel, I argue, to the extent that he also claims that the self requires a search for itself to be known. The self becomes known through the act of publicly calling the given into question.

Language and Patočka

Patočka was a philosopher involved in existentialism and phenomenology at the period when a battle was being waged by the logical positivists of Vienna Circle against what they termed the 'sophistry' of existentialist thinkers. The anti-metaphysical bent of logical positivism led it to attempt to unmask what Arnason calls the fictions of an employment of language free from critical analysis.³⁰⁶ A part of Patočka's project, therefore, is to contribute to the defence of the phenomenological existentialist project. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to closely examine Patočka's contribution to this defence; however, I mention this as an issue in Patočka's philosophy because it introduces Patočka's particular concern for the concept of language. Logical positivism tried to set up conditions of linguistic meaningfulness on empirical foundations, such as reference to sense data. Metaphysical concepts like the soul, essence, or substance were tossed into the fire as no sensory experience could help verify applications of these concepts. Famously, and ironically, what became known as the verifiability principle, that a statement is meaningful only if it is in principle empirically verifiable, itself requires a

306 Johann Arnason "The Idea of Negative Platonism: Jan Patočka's Critique and Recovery of Metaphysics" *Thesis Eleven* 90 (2007): 14

metaphysical underpinning. There seems to be no empirical experience that could demonstrate the validity of the verifiability principle. Patočka concludes from this line of thought that logical positivism is ideological. Patočka held that logical positivism requires a conscious ignoring of the plurality of the experience of language.

Language is history, not a once and for all structure; it is not given, but created through our acts and efforts, which aim at an ever broader reach and ever richer contents, without ever achieving all round completion; thus in contrast to the passive sense data of the animal, the human being constantly perceives and grasps new meanings. But this historicity of the very structure of language is only possible because man is undetermined by sense data (and more generally speaking, by anything that is complete and fixed before him or outside him); he is 'free'.³⁰⁷

Patočka is advocating a transcendental claim that given that radical freedom is established on the basis of the historicity of language as an inescapable feature of our experience of language. Patočka is describing a pluralistic world which is in part created by discourse but which relies, nonetheless, on a certain sense of the metaphysical. For Patočka, there is an aspect to the human condition which is universal. It is important to note, as Peter Lom does in 'East Meets West – Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom'³⁰⁸ that Patočka accepts, with Heidegger, the death of metaphysical thinking. This does not mean that he seeks in his philosophy to cast aside metaphysical thought as if it were wholly dispensable. He aims, instead, to reinvigorate a sense of the importance of metaphysics despite its failure to provide a total answer to the human

307 Patočka, in Arnason, "Negative Platonism": 14.

308 Lom "Rorty and Patočka," 448.

condition.³⁰⁹ For Patočka, the human mind, despite the failures of metaphysics, constantly returns to rethink metaphysics as if there is something in the language of metaphysics which provides a reference to ineliminable aspects of the human condition.

For Patočka, every ethical claim intrinsically relies upon a metaphysical ground. As Lom writes,

But how does it follow... that life does not allow complete neutrality in ethics that every kind of ethical claim is in one way or another always accompanied by a metaphysical position? Patočka answers by way of an example. He points out that every antimetaphysical position, despite its intentions, still makes metaphysical claims. He cites nihilism and positivism as two illustrations of this point. The positivist wishes to distinguish between facts and values, and he claims that reason may tell us nothing about values, that they are merely arbitrary constructs. But behind the positivists position is the assumption that values will not sustain rational evaluation because there is nothing to reason about and that means that our world, and by implication, our universe, itself is not susceptible to reason or rational evaluation. Similarly, in his reflections on nihilism, Patočka notes that in denying the possibility of any kind of rationally defensible moral principles, the nihilist oversteps the bounds of his doubts and slides into dogmatism. His denial of morality is accompanied by the metaphysical position that the nature of this universe is a chaotic one: “nihilism demonstrates itself to be dogmatic as soon as it proclaims meaninglessness as the final and incontrovertible fact” of the nature as a whole.³¹⁰

309 Ibid.

310 Ibid 451.

The argument against logical positivism is the argument that Patočka uses to rescue some measure of meaningfulness for metaphysical thought. This is not to say that Patočka is a metaphysician. He is not committed to the discovery of a final answer to questions of metaphysics. Nonetheless, he robustly defends the significance and importance of certain kinds of metaphysical thinking. He is in agreement with Heidegger and Nietzsche, as stated in Chapter 3, that the greatest error in philosophy is Plato's provision of an answer to Socrates question of Being. One of the main aims of *The Heretical Essays* is to demonstrate that Christian metaphysics ought to bear its share of responsibility for the great war of the twentieth century and the wars of European history, in the sense that out of Christian metaphysics, the turn to the secular is initiated. The Christian empire, coming out of the Roman empire, for Patočka, transforms care for the soul as a search for law and justice, in to a search for a justice set by a divine being, a being outside of this world.³¹¹ Patočka argues that from this paradigm care for the soul transforms from a care to be, to a care to have.³¹² The interest in Europe is for a conquest of nature. This change occurs in the sixteenth century and the Empire expansions of that time are for Patočka a result of this change of interest.³¹³ For Patočka, the Christian viewing life only in its immediacy, not as a world in flux through shaking, is the root of nihilism. One cannot avoid this nihilism and hold one final, exclusive metaphysical position which would stagnate history.³¹⁴ But interestingly one cannot, as we are historical beings, avoid thinking metaphysically, in so far as the thought of the day is our thought as well. One must step into and out of history

311 Patočka *Heretical Essays*, 81-82

312 Ibid 83

313 Ibid

314 Ibid 77

simultaneously so as to shake history and realise the potential for change within the immediate.³¹⁵

The job of the philosopher, to retrace some of the argument from Chapter 3, is not to provide whole and total answers to the question of Being and the question of the universe, which for Patočka are analogous questions. Instead the job of the philosopher is to demonstrate the plurality of positions that can be taken and to warn that adopting dogmatically a traditional form of metaphysics is to pin down (and consider) what is essentially not determinable. As Lom points out, Patočka finds the place of philosophy in the confrontation of the unknown as a totality (that is, the universe as unknown) and the subsequent feeling of wonder. Wonder at a specific reality which gives the impression of being tameable by reason is more the province of science.³¹⁶

Patočka is turning back to the early Greeks and their experience of wonder.

For Patočka, the experience of wonder is important, not only because it signals the beginning of freedom, the precise moment when man begins to philosophize, but also because it constantly points to humility: the acknowledgement that man is not the most powerful and most knowing element in the universe.³¹⁷

I am reminded of an idea from a selection of Nietzsche's notebooks, published under the title *Philosophy and Truth* where he writes,

315 Ibid.

316 Lom "Rorty and Patočka 454.

317 Ibid 454

And just as every porter wants to have an admirer, so even the proudest of men, the philosopher, supposes that he sees on all sides the eyes of the universe telescopically focused upon his action and thought.

It is remarkable that this was brought about by the intellect, which was certainly allotted to these most unfortunate, delicate, and ephemeral beings merely as a device for detaining them a minute within existence. For without this addition they would have every reason to flee this existence...³¹⁸

Where Nietzsche goes on to suggest that the experience of the totality of the universe reveals morality to be a relative human construct, Patočka, like Havel, emphasises the experience of wonder at what Heidegger and Patočka would call the mystery of Being. For Patočka, the possibility of pluralism should engender a feeling of humility when making decisions for action. Rather than the will to dominate nature, a feeling of wonder before Being leads us to see ourselves as a part of nature and not as the master of it. Hence, humility before nature makes us responsible to it in so far as we are a part of nature and being responsible for ourselves entails a responsibility. In a sense, a person is inseparable from their surroundings and hence being responsible for oneself must entail being responsible for the place in which one is, for the nature that provides the psychological conditions of existence.

Freedom for Patočka is a kind of transcendence. It is the ability to use thought and action to refer beyond the concrete and historical condition of our Being. Freedom is “transcending facticity through projecting possibilities.”³¹⁹ However, for Patočka, freedom is, as Ivan Chvatik notes, rooted to a concrete situation. Freedom is hence, in

318 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans Daniel Breazeale (New York: Humanities, 1990), 79-80.

319 Ivan Chvatik “The Responsibility of the “Shaken”: Jan Patočka and his “Care for the Soul” in the “Post-European” World, in Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology; Centenary Papers, ed. Ivan Chvatik & Erika Abrams, (New York: Springer, 2011), 264.

my view, political. The Socratic inquirer whom Patočka imagines is, within their concrete situation, using freedom to project new possibilities within their situation. Hence being open to freedom is transcendence of the specificity of a situation. Returning to the idea of negative Platonism, the role of metaphysics is not to provide dogmatic answers to metaphysical questions but to hint at the possibility of transcendence, to provide a glimpse at freedom to transcend the mundane that only comes with humility before the totality of the natural world.

Kenneth Zagacki, in his paper ‘Václav Havel and the Rhetoric of Folly’, writes that in Havel’s rhetoric there is an emphasis on the recognition of folly in history, which opens up a space where history can be challenged and new possibilities discovered.³²⁰ For Zagacki, Havel as President, through his rhetoric of folly (his speeches which highlighted the errors of history,) brings a sense of hope for the future. This hope comes through the space opened by the recognition of mistakes, and the certainty of future mistakes. This space allows a greater number of controversial subjects to be examined.³²¹ Havel’s talk of what Zagacki calls the “fragility” of the human condition (and which I have been emphasising as its plurality,) serves as a “difficult reminder that one could never be certain that one’s own position was right.”³²² When Havel and Patočka talk about the transcendent, they mean the human capacity to think beyond one’s immediate situation. I would like to link Zagacki’s discussion of the recognition of folly to the discussion of transcendence that I have presented by claiming that recognition of folly, or humility, is what creates the space for a recognition of freedom, and hence transcendence.

320 Kenneth Zagacki, “Václav Havel and the Rhetoric of Folly” in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, ed. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co.), 1999, 132.

321 Ibid 139-140.

322 Ibid 140.

Discourse is a medium through which the given can be called into question by recognition of the historical and ahistorical nature of language. Discourse speaks from a certain situation and hints at the freedom of transcendence. This is most obvious in ethical questioning. When I ask, “must I?”, I am asking a specific situation to reveal its possibilities. In the language of questioning is revealed freedom. In fact the very possibility of freedom lies in the possibility of posing a question, a pragmatic mode of utterance. Havel, by engaging in a discourse about the past errors of Czech people in their complicity with socialism, can be considered to be opening up a discussion for future behaviour. His discourse is a reminder of freedom.

Patočka’s Thoughts on Plato and Logos

Even though, as stated in Chapter 3, negative Platonism involves a rejection of the attempt by Plato to supply metaphysical certainty to the natural world, Patočka still finds in Plato the preparations for a ground in which metaphysical thinking is possible. This acceptance of Plato’s confrontation with the natural world is the platonic aspect of negative Platonism. As Edward Findlay points out

Jan Patočka is both a critic of metaphysics and a defender of transcendence. [He] argue[s] forcefully that any attempt to understand the full scope and complexity of the human condition will require that we grasp its core possibility: the ability of human beings to transcend their immediate and simply given context. It is in reaching beyond the limits of given reality, in questioning and in seeking the whole that encompasses our world, that we begin to live according to our potential as human beings.³²³

323 Edward Findlay, “Politics, Metaphysics and Anti-Foundationalism in The Works of Eric Voegelin and Jan Patočka” in Eric Voegelin’s *Dialogue with the Postmoderns; Searching for foundations*, ed. Peter Petrakis & Cecil Eubanks, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 167.

Hence even though Patočka denies the separation of two worlds that platonic metaphysics propounds, in the sense that a Platonic Idea is objectifiable, the ground of thinking that allows for transcendence is central to Patočka's project, and is also central to the doctrine of Ideas.³²⁴ In Plato, the world of ideas points to a physical reality. That is, the idea of a horse illuminates a physical horse – or all physical horses owe their essence to the idea of a horse. The Idea of a horse is separate from the Idea of a peach. For Patočka the problem is not the separation of Idea and appearance, which is fine and even necessary given his description of the possibility of transcendence. Instead, for Patočka, the focus should be on the distancing between Idea and reality. Patočka focuses on the link between the two worlds – the chorismos. Chorismos can be described as separation. Aristotle's criticism of Plato's doctrine of ideas criticises the idea of chorismos.³²⁵ Aristotle's criticisms are important because Patočka turns his attention to them, and to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, (in *Plato and Europe*) in order to elaborate upon the role of philosophy. Although *Plato and Europe* does not refer to the idea of negative Platonism, the theory still fits the present discussion because it illuminates Patočka's thinking about Plato and metaphysics.

Aristotle's criticisms of Plato's doctrine of ideas have been neatly summarised by Erich Frank.

Aristotle rejects the transcendence, the chorismos, of the ideas, i.e. Plato's conviction that true existence, the idea, is absolutely separated from the objects of this world; in their finite, particular, and perishable existence these

³²⁴ Patočka "Negative Platonism", 204

³²⁵ Aristotle "Book 7" *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.7.vii.html> (accessed July 14, 2011).

objects reflect only an image, as it were, the eternal and universal subsistence of an unique idea; they “imitate it” and “partake of it” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987 b10), without ever being able to reproduce it themselves. For Plato, therefore, the idea has a form of existence entirely different from that of particulars, of which nevertheless the idea is predicated. Between idea and particular there is the same relation – to use Aristotle’s own example concerning this Platonic conception – as there is between the real Callias and his wooden portrait....

It is the Platonic principle of *chorismos* which Aristotle attacks most ardently. The existence of the idea, as Aristotle formulates it in the general notion, the definition is separated only in thought from the particulars whose real character it expresses, whereas in reality it is imminent in the particulars.³²⁶

Patočka is interested in Aristotle’s move past Plato, especially in his announcement, in Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that every single particular action heads for a good of its own. With people there is a multiplicity of goals, with the goal being determined as the good. Hence for Patočka, as with Aristotle, there can be a multiplicity of goals.³²⁷ Patočka is thinking about different concepts at the same time. In thinking about Aristotle and the rejection of the *chorismos*, Patočka also considers Aristotle’s idea of the *telos* of an action. Essentially, what is important about Aristotle’s rejection of Platonic forms for Patočka is his announcement that what Plato calls forms, are just ideas inherent in the substance themselves. That is, there is no universal idea of blackness. Instead the black of my keyboard is inherent in the substance of the keyboard. This is important because,

³²⁶ Erich Frank, “The Fundamental Opposition of Plato and Aristotle” *The American Journal of Philology* 61, no.1 (1940): 34-53.

³²⁷ Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 201.

as Patočka develops his notion that the *chorismos* is the bridge to transcendence, Aristotle's claim that the idea is inherent in the substance is quite useful. Rather than transcendence giving substance its existence, transcendence is an inherent part of substance.

For Patočka it is bridging the *chorismos* which is the task of philosophy and so he turns his attention to Aristotle as well as Plato. In *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates sees revealing justice as the ultimate task of philosophy, that is knowing the form of justice. For Patočka this is not possible. In *Plato and Europe* he turns to Aristotle to find, in Greek thought, an understanding that the condition of man is freedom and that the goals of man are pluralistic writing,

When for example, Aristotle says that philosophy, at least the kind he lays out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is not concerned with knowing what is, nor about knowing what are moral values so that they can be theoretically analysed, but rather that we philosophize in order to become good people.³²⁸

Patočka, in *Plato and Europe*, focuses on the idea of motion in Plato's and Aristotle's description of 'care for the soul'. For Plato the movement is vertical - from appearance to Idea (as explained in the allegory of the cave). For Aristotle the movement is horizontal, regarding human action to achieve a goal. It is this focus on human action, in a horizontal rather than vertical sense which is attractive to Patočka. This is because Aristotle recognises that the goal of man is not as easily defined as it is in Plato.

Patočka, in analysing Aristotle and Plato, rejects the idea that *chorismos* is not important. He writes that *chorismos* is a significant phenomenon which cannot be

328 Ibid 195

ignored or silenced.³²⁹ As discussed above, and in Chapter 3, freedom for Patočka is the experience of transcendence, of distancing from things as they appear, and the *chorismos* is the experience of transcendence. Hence it is no surprise that *chorismos* is important to Patočka. Patočka's reinterpretation of Platonism, in negative Platonism, posits the idea as neither an object nor a concept.³³⁰ Instead the ideas are that which give freedom, the force which "sustains our ability to resist "mere reality.""³³¹ Rather than understanding Plato's metaphysics as positive systematic knowledge, Patočka seeks to understand Plato's ideas as the possibility of distancing from any possible object. This is not a distancing in the sense that one is removed from what one is considering. Rather, one uses the *chorismos* to remain attached as the bridge between the distanced thought and the embedded in-the-worldness of what is being considered. Rather than the idea being an objective reality, the idea becomes the possibility of transcendence and the *chorismos* the experience of transcendence. Aristotle's criticisms of the *chorismos* are important because the *chorismos* is attached to every object, not to its universal form, but as its transcendence.

Aristotle helps Patočka to see the plurality of guises of freedom which every situation contains and so for Patočka every human action contains both the horizontal movement of Aristotle (action towards a goal) and the vertical movement of Plato (movement towards transcendence). Of course Patočka notes that these movements can be negative. One has the freedom to be evil, or one has the freedom not to act to achieve a goal. However the point still stands that Patočka is here fusing central ideas of Plato's metaphysics and Aristotle's ethics. For Patočka, the philosophy of Aristotle serves to

329 Patočka "Negative Platonism," 198.

330 Ibid 199

331 Ibid 199

show that the experience of the cave contains a richness which escaped Plato.³³²

Aristotle, according to Patočka, understood that everything is inside the cave.³³³ Patočka acknowledges the world outside of the cave without giving definition to it. The sun that illuminates the world of Plato's allegory, and which represents the good, is manifold in its appearance, and hence is not able to be positively described – it is simply the call to transcendence which makes transcendence in the cave a possibility. Aristotle's rejection of the forms is not important to Patočka. He writes that perhaps Aristotle understood the forms better than Plato did.³³⁴ What Aristotle achieves is the politicising of Plato's vertical movement. As Patočka writes,

Aristotle is the first philosopher in the entire tradition who thematizes action, the acting of man. This moment, the analysis of human action in Aristotle, which he does not see something as exterior, but rather as determinant, which takes place within the soul, which takes place in the sense of the good life and has an influence on life in its whole – this acting actually concretely – is the experience leading Aristotle to bend into the horizontal that vertical movement that the Platonic philosopher carried out.³³⁵

Rather than the philosopher escaping from the cave into the ideal world of forms, thus making an absolute break with the physical world of the finite and changeable, the importance of Aristotle lies in his announcement that a life of politics can procure a good life as can the life of philosophy. What actions are done inside the cave are under the scrutiny of Aristotle and it is this idea that Patočka would like to carry into twentieth

332 Patočka *Plato and Europe*, 215

333 Ibid 215

334 Patočka "Negative Platonism," 200

335 Ibid 197.

century philosophy. Aristotle's transformation of Plato is "the existential experience upon which philosophy leans."³³⁶ Patočka is clear that being a philosopher, for Aristotle, was not simply a profession but a way of living.

Language is the key to understanding Patočka's conception of freedom. *Chorismos* is bridged through language. Arnason writes that Patočka sees language as "an ongoing creation of new conventions and systems".³³⁷ The creative aspect of language reaches to transcendence linking the actual with the idea. Consider the following passage from *Plato and Europe* regarding care for the soul:

In Plato, it is the specific vertical movement, vertical in the sense that it heads from that place where, so to speak, we originally, usually, and first of all are – in the lowlands of existence – to its peaks, to that from which springs existence and from which it develops, to the principles in Plato's sense. The possibility of this movement shows itself to us in that, in the sphere of logos, in the sphere of meaningful speech, the decadent manner of existence announces itself in its decadence as incoherence, whereas care for the soul takes place in logos, makes the person whole. It makes him close to the principles in that sense; he who withstands the examination of the care of the soul is concentrated within himself. He is not in contradiction; he is unified in his entire perceiving of life; and just in this way he gets to the proximity of the unifying measure, which measures all actualities here around us. This unifying measure is just the idea. For this reason, the movement the soul

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Arnason "The Idea of Negative Platonism," 15.

performs in the concern, care of the soul for itself, is the distinctive experience if you like, that there exists something like the idea.³³⁸

This is quite a cryptic passage. However, what shines through is the role that language plays in realising transcendence. Care for the soul, as the realisation of transcendence is achieved as a vertical movement towards the form. Meaningful speech reveals the world as transcendence, that is what is immediately given, all actualities are measured against their transcendence. The unifying measure is the non-objective idea, or transcendence itself. Hence for Patočka, the inquiry of logos as the realisation of transcendence reveals the idea not as an objective or subjective reality, but as the possibility of transcendence – the chorismos.

For Patočka, transcendence is achieved through logos and a questioning of the immediately given. The incomprehensible nature of the Idea means that language, as the bridge over the chorismos between the world of Idea and world of appearance, is in constant struggle with what is given and what cannot be fully known. The natural world never gives itself totally to reason and yet in logos there is a struggle with perception that reveals, if the discourse is meaningful, an accurate and useful account of the world. Through questioning discourse, the radical freedom that characterises the human condition is revealed and the individual can understand themselves as freedom. This means that through discourse, the transcendental ground of the Idea can be located. Meaningfully employing discourse to reveal this radical freedom is a form of caring for the soul, hence there is a sense that care for the soul is about a pragmatic discourse that questions the world.

³³⁸ Patočka *Plato and Europe*, 196-197

In Patočka's focus on philosophy as a practical activity of transcendence in the works of Plato and Aristotle, there are echoes of a contemporary of Patočka's – Hans-George Gadamer. Famously, Gadamer announced that "being that can be understood is language."³³⁹ Gadamer's own interpretation of this statement, which applies to this discussion of Patočka, is that in language, our understanding of being-in-the-world comes to be known.³⁴⁰

There is much in Gadamer and Patočka that is similar. Both are heavily influenced by Heidegger and see language as the means of realising freedom. The Heideggerian idea of thrownness is ineluctable for both thinkers. Historicity and traditions are also ineluctable as they are a part of the condition of thrownness. I am introducing Gadamer because when Havel appropriates Patočka's thoughts on language, there is significance for the field of hermeneutics. Patočka never openly writes a text on hermeneutics. However, his work seems to prefigure a lot of the ideas of the main figures in hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur wrote the preface to the French edition of Patočka's *Heretical Essays*. Ricoeur states that the most important argument of the essays is the consideration of the possibility of Socratic politics awakening "a solidarity of the shaken" to refuse mobilisation in the context of the state of total war in the twentieth century. Despite the analysis of pre-history and history that the *Heretical Essays* engage with, the idea of dialogue with tradition to transcend tradition is still central to Patočka's work, and prefigures the politics of hermeneutics.

The question that Ricoeur points to is central to the work of Gadamer, Patočka, and Havel. Within the context of thrownness, Gadamer argues that all understanding arises only in and through our prejudices. Dermot Moran writes that for Gadamer, "we have to engage in dialogue in order to bring out and make transparent to ourselves our own

339 Hans-George Gadamer in Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 269.

340 Ibid.

presuppositions and prejudgements.”³⁴¹ For Moran, what Gadamer is trying to do is to critique the enlightenment conception of an opposition between tradition and pure reason. For Gadamer, reason operates within tradition. It is through dialogue that the motion of Plato and Aristotle, which is described above, is achieved towards the good. This motion is achieved inside the cave, as it is impossible to escape the state of thrownness. Philosophy for these thinkers does not delude itself into thinking that some total description of truth is even attainable, instead philosophy must start with the Heideggerian recognition that human consciousness is historical and finite.

There is a tendency in the phenomenology of Patočka and Havel to see the role of philosophy as one of cutting through ideological distortions. This is not purely a phenomenological task. Investigating the way in which phenomenon appears must be aimed at understanding if it is to be politically useful, and if it is to clarify the muddy waters of ideological distortion. Hence there is, to use Gadamer’s thought again, a hermeneutic element to Patočka and Havel’s philosophy. The word ‘hermeneutics’ contains the name of the Greek god Hermes – the messenger of the gods. Hermeneutics is a study of the bridge over Plato’s *chorismos* because Hermes delivers messages from the gods to humans. I wish to demonstrate in the next section how the themes of Patočka’s reinterpretation of the ancient Greek philosophers have been taken up in a phenomenological/hermeneutic interpretation of the contemporary moment in Havel. Havel, to borrow a phrase from Foucault, offers a mode of historicising the present.

³⁴¹ Moran *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 278

Havel's appropriation of the Greek Element of Patočka's Thought

Patočka's practice of philosophy, in the mode of samizdat³⁴² lectures and essays is Patočka's mode of interpreting the present by interpreting the traditions which have given rise to the present. His life, as much as his philosophy, is an education in living under totalitarian conditions. As Lau put it:

Patočka's heroic resistance against political persecution under a socialist regime in his home country, by incessantly pursuing independent philosophical research and private philosophical teaching practically under the eyes of state police, is an eminent example showing that it is possible to continue to philosophize under adverse social, political, and institutional conditions (he was allowed to teach philosophy only during eight years in his whole intellectual life, from 1945-1949, and then from 1968-1972, and had been under almost total isolation during the 1950s). The way he exercises the freedom of thinking and conducts his moral conscience at the risk of his own existence is an act of affirmation of the basic civil rights prescribed verbally by the law of the socialist state but proscribed in fact under a totalitarian regime. This act comprises not only an educational content directed towards the younger generations of his own country, but also a political message of protestation against institutional violations of these rights under such a regime.³⁴³

342 Samizdat is the secret writing and circulation of dissident literature that carries with it the possibility of harsh punishments. As noted in Chapter 3, Patočka was forbidden to teach and research at universities for most of his life. The fact that there is a body of Patočka's texts at all today is due to the efforts of close friends and students who have preserved Patočka's writings, at great risk to themselves.

343 Kwok-Ying Lau "Jan Patočka: Critical Consciousness and Non-Eurocentric Philosopher of the Phenomenological Movement" *Studia Phenomenologica* Vii (2007): 477

Havel is not a historian, nor is he a professional philosopher. All of his doctorates are honorary, earned for his actions throughout his life. However, the example of a life in truth is just as clear in Havel as it is in Patočka. Havel, as mentioned in chapter 3, theorises the present, where Patočka illuminates the present by reference to ancient history.

A central aim of this chapter is to illustrate how the analysis that Patočka applies to ancient philosophy in his writing finds root in Havel, even though Havel does not analyse the same classical texts as Patočka. With the above discussion of Patočka's philosophy in mind, consider the following letter from *Letters to Olga*.

My family, friends, acquaintances, fellow prisoners, the unknown weather woman, my fellow passengers in the streetcar, the transport commission, those who go to see my plays, the public, my homeland and the state power structure; countless relationships, tensions, loves, dependencies, confrontations, atmospheres, milieus, experiences, acts, predilections, aims and things with which I am loosely or closely connected - all of that forms the "concrete horizon" of my relating, because all of it is my world, the world as my home, the world in which I am rooted in a complex way, to which I ceaselessly relate, against the background of which I define myself, through which I simply am. It is the world of my existing, such as it presents and opens itself to me, as I make myself at home in it, as it constitutes itself for me through my experiences and I - in one way or another - make it meaningful. Thus my 'I' creates this world and this world creates my 'I.'³⁴⁴

344 Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 356.

Here we find the familiar concept of thrownness. Havel is writing that his I is a product of contingency. His world is defined by the interactions that he has with the world. As Heidegger would present it, there is an element of the world which is already defined before the I asserts itself or knows itself. The next chapter will explore the existential nature of a life in truth but here I want to make a comparison with the philosophy of John Paul Sartre. Sartre also writes about transcendence, and there is a similarity in meaning. For Sartre the For-itself can direct itself beyond what is given to consciousness in a new project of itself. For Havel and Patočka, transcendence has this quality, but it is also in relation to an ultimate transcendent – Being. Being is not a no-thing in Havel and Patočka as it is for Heidegger. When Patočka talks about the vertical movement of reflection and Havel talks about the horizon of my horizons, or my absolute horizon, they are invoking something more than the phenomenological concept of transcendence.

And yet: my existence in this world and the way I relate to my “concrete horizon” cannot be explained, as it may seem at first, by some one-sided and unqualified clinging to them as such, by surrendering to their actually existing, isolated, relative, self exhausting, phenomenal and superficial manifestations. It depends rather, on something else: on the extent to which I direct my existence-in-the-world toward Being: not, of course, toward Being as something outside the world and which can be attained only by “leapfrogging” or ignoring the world, but on the contrary, toward Being as something that is “in the world” far more radically than anything the world declares and offers itself to be at first sight: that is towards its own Being, i.e., to the very Being of this world. This can only mean that through my life, through my life, through the experiences and trials I undergo, I gradually penetrate beyond the different horizons of my “concrete horizon,” I attempt to widen them, to step

past them, to see beyond them, to get what is on the other side of them - until ultimately I aspire towards a place beyond its ultimate conceivable limit, the “horizon of all my horizons,” to what I call the “absolute horizon” of my relating. And only then - as I gradually come to realise (though failure to do so won’t change the essence of things) - does this horizon breathe into my world, my existence in it and the way I relate to my “concrete horizon,” its proper substance, coherence, meaning, perspective and direction; it is this in which the language of the world - as that which is “unexpressed” in it - first addresses me in a way that truly demands commitment, and thus ultimately becomes the only true, firm, and final focus of my relating to the world and my existence in it, the only true firm and final background of my self constitution and self definition, the only genuine, and genuinely determining “co-ordinates” of my true identity.³⁴⁵

One of the key claims of the above passage is that a higher horizon, or the “absolute horizon” speaks to Havel as the language of the unexpressed. He does not see that he sees it, or feels it, or even intuits an ultimate transcendent (Havel calls the transcendent a “a place beyond conceivable limit”). Instead, that which is unexpressed, is revealed through a language. It is to go one step further to say the ‘unexpressable.’ I interpret this in the light of the above discussion of Patočka’s reinterpretation of Plato’s cave allegory. It appears to me as though a higher horizon, which is intuited through a gradual increase in intelligibility as one pushes further the “concrete horizon” with the understanding that there is something more to push to, is analogous to the world of ideas calling to the philosopher from outside the cave. Once the siren song of the absolute horizon has been

³⁴⁵ Ibid 356-357.

heard, it breathes life into the concrete horizon, giving a sense of transcendence to the mundane. Havel is not suggesting that the absolute horizon is intelligible. Instead, just as Patočka does, Havel is attempting to find a space for metaphysical thinking in a post-metaphysical world.

Havel, in a playful but forceful manner, rejects the possibility of metaphysics. More precisely, he rejects metaphysical answers; he writes that it is impossible to leapfrog from the appearance to the thing-in-itself. Instead, as Patočka writes, the call of the world outside of the cave hints at a responsibility to illuminate the world inside of the cave without ever having to leave the cave. The term ‘horizon’ has been used by Havel and Patočka quite regularly but has escaped analysis in this thesis thus far. It would be valuable to show here how useful this term is for both thinkers. The idea of pushing a horizon back best characterises the post-metaphysical project of Havel and Patočka.

‘Horizon’ is a term common amongst phenomenologists. It is used to describe the limits of our awareness of our temporal, spatial and our attention to our surroundings. Havel and Patočka speak of multiple and hierarchal horizons. Just as in the vertical movement of Plato, through intelligibility one pushes the boundary of one’s concrete horizons making new horizons. However, this movement is more accurately thought of as the bending of the vertical movement to the horizontal which Patočka analysed and I discuss previously in this chapter. Rather than making an absolute split between horizons, listening to the language of the world enriches one’s concrete experience of it. The “language of the world”, for Havel, is the unexpressed authentic world behind the veils of appearances. It is, to go back to a point from the previous chapter, the call of Being to the self in a state of thrownness. Through Socratic politics, or the politics of inquiry, the concrete horizon is demonstrably much wider than originally conceived. Hence human action is never, as one’s first horizon might suggest, only restricted within the confines of the immediately apprehensible. Instead the world is a much richer,

deeper and complex web of connections than the concrete horizon reveals to the 'I'. Again the bridge over the chormos between the absolute horizon and the concrete horizon is logos. Through language one can be heretical towards history, one can speak past the horizon of historicity and expand one's thought, oriented towards the higher, "absolute horizon."

For Plato, there is a call from the Ideas, a responsibility towards them. In a similar way, for Havel there exists a responsibility oriented towards the absolute horizon, as unintelligible as it is. This unintelligibility leaves us within the cave, using all the resources of language to appreciate the possibilities beyond it; we contemplate the ungraspable complexity of existence-in-the-world. Havel's project, like Gadamer's and Patočka's, is not about separating out the traditional and the rational; it is about employing the rational within tradition. One's concrete horizon is inescapable. Also inescapable is humanity's freedom. The combination of freedom and the concrete supplies the motion to widen the horizon of the 'I' to increase one's understanding of one's situation, which Havel and Patočka both claim correlates to an increase in responsibility for one's situation.

Letter 140 continues to speak of responsibility:

Thus if it seems at first that my responsibility - as responsibility "toward" - simply meant responsibility toward my immediate surroundings, to my "non I," to my world and thus to my "particular horizon," then it is obviously not entirely true: I am genuinely, fully, and reliably responsible for my immediate surrounding only if that responsibility is permeated by, based on and

subordinated to responsibility toward my “absolute horizon.” Any form of clinging to that surrounding as such ends up as “worldly” utilitarianism.³⁴⁶

This is not a philosophy of individualism in the sense of a libertarian or neoliberal understanding of the individual as responsible to themselves only. Havel does however, promote the integrity of the individual; hence Havel is offering here a liberal individualism where the quality of the individual is the starting block for a good society. In other words, for Havel, responsibility is an issue for the individual. In Chapters 7 and 8 I will explain how Havel’s sense of responsibility (what he has here called “worldly utilitarianism” based on his analysis of the self,) leads one to a liberal philosophy. Here, though, it is sufficient to say that Havel’s sense of the self is only interpreted in the self’s relationship to a non-immediate other - to the other outside the cave. This responsibility to the past, present and future is not a limiting of the responsibility, a demarcation of what one is responsible for. Instead, the self’s critical examination of the life-world reveals the extent to which one is responsible for the past, present and future. For Havel, identity is understood as the actions that one makes in relation to the past present and future. Being calls to the self in its condition of throwness, calling for the self to widen its moral circle and to act more responsibly in the knowledge that one’s actions affect the past, the present and the future.

Havel’s letters to Czech leaders at times of political crisis are arguably based on this philosophy from *Letters to Olga* and the Patočkan reinterpretation of the Greeks. In *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel is asked about his early dissident activities and what effect he thought he could produce in the political situation. Havel makes no bones about his naivety. He refers to himself, self-deprecatingly as a young hooligan who thought he

³⁴⁶ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 357

could take on the establishment. Indeed the title of the chapter in which he discusses these activities is 'facing the establishment.' For Havel, the establishment was not accessible to his concrete horizon. Some manifestations of the regime were definitely a part of that but the leaders of the regime, the people who Havel's actions were trying to reach, were beyond his immediate awareness. Indeed, he speaks of his great nerves, and his feelings of being out of place when he is invited to a political dinner attended by Alexander Dubcek.³⁴⁷

Despite his assertion of naivety, Havel is aware that his actions had effects in that they became part of a wave, or collection, of dissent action that effected real change, if even, in the short term this was simply a change in tactics on the part of a regime which was not used to organised dissent in the form of mass petitions by major cultural figures and other such activity. Despite Havel's inability to include in his concrete horizon the upper echelons of the communist regime, Havel recognised that these people, and their decisions, were a part of his experience, hence he expanded his horizons to involve them. Similarly, with the trial of *The Plastic People of The Universe*, Havel notes that the music they created did not appeal to him at all when he heard it at first. He had no dealings with the band and yet the idea of their self-expression being halted filled him with a sense of responsibility to fight for their freedom. My point here is that Havel is expanding or widening his horizon to recognise the interrelatedness of causes, or goals, despite the pluralistic and differentiated appearance of them. Havel's actions as dissident demonstrate an awareness that although he might not be dealing with the regime immediately, his actions are still framed against an understanding of a larger reality than that which appears to immediate awareness. Hence his actions go beyond their specificity and the result is political effect. The open letters "Dear Dr Husak" and

³⁴⁷ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 99

“Letter to Alexander Dubcek” betray Havel’s complete lack of personal dealings with either political leader. Havel is not scholarly in these letters. That is, he is not engaged simply in criticism. Instead he is inserting his will for reform into the letters and addressing them to the Czech people. The public nature of these letters represents a step beyond the samizdat lectures of Patočka, in that they reach beyond their specificity in a much wider public space. Patočka’s authoring of the charter 77 document is his only contribution to widening the concrete horizon of the Czech nation in line with Havel’s dissident project. My point is that Patočka speaks of strife with the political regime and enacts such strife, albeit on a small underground scale, whereas Havel’s actions represent a truly front line responsibility towards the regime.

The final section of this chapter will give a brief overview of Patočka’s theorising of the front line experience of the two world wars of the twentieth century and his description of “the solidarity of the shaken” which is the experience fundamental to the front line. Patočka sees in these experiences the possibility of rescue from ideological force. The discussion is important to this chapter as I aim to elaborate on Havel’s realisation of freedom through strife with the regime.

Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War

For Patočka, the defining events of the twentieth century were the two world wars, brought on as a result of revolutionary Germany’s industrialisation of warfare, and the playing out of the ideas, represented in the philosophy of Nietzsche, that meaning is superfluous to power. Patočka argues that the First World War’s creation of the front line is a result of technology influencing warfare. The terrible conditions in the trenches were compounded and necessitated by massive increases in fire power. Patočka calls the front line of WWI “absurdity par excellence”³⁴⁸ - the space where everything that is

348 Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 126

valued by humanity is destroyed. The result of this is the creation of a desire to follow any leader or idea that promises to make the possibility of the front line disappear. This desire led, in Patočka's eyes, to a transformation of the will to war from fighting for a result to fighting for peace. The Second World War can be understood in this context. With the increase in industrialisation and technological sophistication, the front of the second world war is less easily defined. It impinges upon the homes of ordinary, non-enlisted citizens and thereby becomes an experience for anybody. What is most interesting about Patočka's descriptions about the two world wars and the logos of the twentieth century is his assertion that the second world war did not result in peace, but a continued state of war: not war as traditionally understood, but a kind of war-like state nonetheless.

With the development of nuclear weapons, war becomes a constant and immediate possibility. (It could start and finish before most are informed of it.) War in recent times, can be hot, cold or smouldering. The demobilisation of Europe after the World War II, for Patočka, has not made for a state of peace in the sense that war is not present. Instead war has appropriated peace.

We continue to be fascinated by force, allow it to lead us along its paths making us its dupes. Where we believe we have mastered it and can depend on it for security, we are in reality in a state of demobilisation and are losing the war which has cunningly changed its visage but has not ceased.³⁴⁹

Life desires peace, but for Patočka, life's attachment to force creates the will to war hence within life there is a tendency for war. I refer back to the third chapter of this

349 Ibid 132

thesis and Patočka's contention, with Heraclitus, that being is strife. In the post-WWII world, the force of economics mobilises "armies of workers, researchers, and engineers." Patočka asks if the demobilisation of Europe and the gradual disappearance of systematic terror at extremes such as with Stalinism, represent a true demobilisation, or a "cynical demobilisation" where individuals are forced to make a separation between truth and the public realm, as they are mobilised into obedience with new forms of power. Patočka anticipates here some of the major themes of critical theory and their analyses of the bureaucracy and industrialisation of modern lives. However, what is quite remarkable in this analysis is Patočka's insistence that it is through confronting the reality of the front, rather than running to life, that true demobilisation can be possible. Patočka locates power, or more accurately freedom, in "the solidarity of the shaken," that is, in the experience of the front from WWI translated into a contemporary experience away from the battle-field.

Patočka draws on the experiences of the front of Ernst Junger³⁵⁰ and Teilhard de Chardin.³⁵¹ Both writers described a sense of transcendence in their front line experience. Teilhard described the front as the crest of a wave that is crashing towards a new destiny. Junger noted that the front was an experience of transcendence from what one previously was - that is, one cannot retreat from what one is taking part in. For Patočka, what is significant about the front is the complete suspension of involvement in the world to take part in the events immediately at hand - "freedom from all the interests of peace, of life, of the day." Day and night are two symbols of the *Heretical Essays* for life and death. Both are equally a part of the human condition and yet we turn more to

350 Ernst Junger was a German novelist and Essayist famous for his conservative outlook which some consider to be sympathetic to fascism.

351 Teilhard de Chardin was a French Jesuit philosopher who wrote on his experiences of the front line in World War 1.

the day, ignoring the night. War, as the experience of the night is an experience of something as equally human as life. Patočka writes:

This absolute freedom is the understanding that here something has already been achieved, something that is not the means to anything else, a stepping stone to..., but rather something above and beyond which there can be nothing. This is the culmination, this self-surrender which can call humans away from their vocations, talents, possibilities, their future. To be capable of that, to be chosen and called for it in a world that uses conflict to mobilize force so that it comes to appear as a totally objectified and objectifying cauldron of energy also means to overcome force.³⁵²

Patočka is arguing that the motives that led to the front are consumed in the front. The danger of the front, coupled with the immense freedom of the front, negates the will to life that created the conditions for the front in the first place.

All everydayness, all visions of future life pale before the simple peak on which humans find themselves standing. In face of that, all the ideas of socialism, of progress, of democratic spontaneity, of independence and freedom appear impoverished, neither viable nor tangible.³⁵³

This is an interesting understanding of freedom that Patočka is putting forward. On the one hand soldiers were being forced to charge to their possible deaths and on the other Patočka is arguing that they exhibit a freedom. For Patočka, the freedom that front line

³⁵² Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 130

³⁵³ Ibid.

soldiers have is to imagine themselves without the distractions of the mundane which cloud caring for the soul in a consumer's life in peace time. The soldiers are free to not think; they dream about the future, free from attachment to the past, and free to tear down the society which created the war in the first place. There is no other experience than the immediacy of war, the front line is absent, for Patočka, from ideology.

For Patočka, the front, or the willingness to sacrifice one's life can be traced to a Christian appropriation of pre-history's understanding of the necessity of death and Plato's taming of death with the immortal soul and Christianity's appropriation of this. Patočka is scathing towards those who would accept everydayness in its givenness. "Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and of its promises. All who betray this solidarity must realise that they are sustaining war and are the parasites on the sidelines who live off the blood of others."³⁵⁴ Returning then to the question posed earlier about why the wars of the twentieth century did not make any lasting peace, Lubica Ucnik gives the following answer from her reading of Patočka:

Peace has become nothing more than war fought with other means,
"appealing to the will to live and to have" Leaving their front experiences
behind, survivors accept that life is geared only towards things, life of
consumerism: carpe deum, enjoy the pleasures of the moment without
concern for the future! Not life in itself, but things make life pleasurable.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ Ibid 135.

³⁵⁵ Lubica Ucnik. "Patočka on Techno-Power and the Sacrificial Victim", in Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology; Centenary Papers, ed. Ivan Chvatik & Erika Abrams, (New York: Springer, 2011): 195-196.

In other words, the war continues on in a demobilized form using ordinary citizens as peaceful combatants, in a war of economics. Any actual combat is far from our shores and used as evidence that our way of life is the superior means of attaining eudemonia. We are told that a soldier from Australian or the U. S who dies in the Middle East is protecting our way of life. The unspoken assumption is that the things of this world are worth a war's continuation.

The contemporary front, for Patočka, is a battle of logos. Those who suspend the given, who escape the ordinary everydayness and realise human freedom, have a responsibility to speak "like Socrates' daimonion" in warnings and prohibitions.³⁵⁶ I mention Patočka's use of the term daimonion because it appears to me that Patočka is referring to the wisdom that appears to come from outside of the cave, illuminating the inside of the cave. Socrates' inner voice speaks with divinity, but refers to the mundane. It is for Patočka the voice of freedom. In a demobilized age still in the mode of war, Patočka again urges strife in the form of warning and dissent against whatever regime or form of force is manipulating human being. This is a rare explicit incitement to action in Patočka's work. In the sixth essay of the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka urges action in the present: recapturing logos by renouncing whatever meaning one already has been given. In Chapter 3, I claimed that it is the example of Patočka as much as the philosophy which is most important in understanding his influence on Havel. We do not have the benefit of Patočka the person to inquire into here, and so his texts, and the testimony of Havel that Patočka lived by his philosophy, will have to serve as the guideline for our understanding of Patočka's motivations. I would like to add to this claim the suggestion that Havel's engagement with late socialism as a dissident seems to be similar to this incitement to action, which is usually implicit, but here explicit in Patočka's thought. However, Havel

³⁵⁶ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 135

does not explicitly quote the “solidarity of the shaken” despite the fact his political philosophy shares so much in common with it. Patočka’s ideas were being discussed amongst the circle of dissidents, and Havel did have a relationship with Patočka; hence the similarity is likely more than coincidence.

The turning towards death which is intrinsic to Patočka’s philosophy is also part and parcel of Havel’s thought. Havel does not write about death very often. However, in *Letters to Olga*, he does muse on the ramifications of mortality. The discussion is thought provoking, and when considered with the rest of Havel’s writings, illuminating. In Letter 97, Havel writes about the inevitability of death and the importance of facing that inevitability rather than hiding from it. Havel muses on whether it is, or should be, a feature of consciousness to push thoughts of death from our minds - as Patočka would write, focus on the day instead of the night - Havel comes to the conclusion that it is not, and should not be. He contends that an awareness of death is “the most essential starting point for any genuinely human... will to life.”³⁵⁷ I believe that Havel is here echoing the thoughts of Patočka in the *Heretical Essays*. This is not a Heideggerian musing, because there is no mention of anxiety in the face of death. Rather a statement that an awareness of death that breathes life into life.

Death, for Havel, makes life meaningful. Acting in the knowledge that we are not permanent, engenders a sense that actions go beyond the self, towards Havel’s “horizon of Being.” Of course for Havel, writing from prison, the meaning and method of dissent is not a topic that would pass through the censors, and so it is not possible for him to make a direct comparison to Patočka’s claim that the front line is a place of absolute freedom. However, Havel’s insistence of an ineliminable significance of a recognition of mortality, taken with his other writings on dissent and life in truth, show a genuine connection to

³⁵⁷ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 238-239

Patočka's particular call for action. Havel is willing to sacrifice his life for dissent. The sacrifice need not result in death, but his dissent represents a confrontation with mortality that ruptured his involvement in the mundane. True, many of his letters to his wife from prison do focus on the mundane. His constant thoughts about relieving pain from haemorrhoids, and his joy at receiving parcels and letters from his wife and friends show a real attachment to the quotidian. However not once does Havel express a desire to leave the prison to return to the ordinary if it would come at the cost of denying his sense of duty to speak a warning to the polis about the dangers of the regime.

Havel, also writing on death, has an interesting point to make about fanatics which is relevant here. After the above discussion about Havel's talk about the necessity of a confrontation with one's mortality, and Patočka's exclamation about the need to throw oneself into a front line, it might seem that an argument could be made that Havel and Patočka would advocate the disruptive tactics of the suicide bomber. The suicide bomber confronts death. Indeed he or she is willing to suspend all mundane attachments, for a rupture with the regime which dominates their political situation, and, in their death, they become a victim among the other casualties of their action. However, this is not what Havel and Patočka are advocating at all. The simple difference between a dissident and a fanatic is the presence of ideology. Even in the choice of death the suicide bomber does not attain freedom. There is, in general, an ideological dullness and conformity behind the suicide bomber's actions. Also Patočka and Havel are not advocating a will to death, but instead are attempting to infuse life with a sense of greater meaning. The actions of a suicide bomber transcend the self and yet, they do not give meaning to the life of the bomber other than the meaning of the immediate suffering that is caused. Suicide bombers do not engage in the front, but are practising what Havel describes (in his description of the dangers of fanaticism), as a dangerous self-alienated faith. Their

actions are born from the belief that an idea is capable of solving human situations.³⁵⁸
This replaces an orientation towards Being, with an orientation towards “human
product.”³⁵⁹

Its tragedy lies in the fact that it takes the beautiful and profoundly authentic
longing of the human “pre-I” to take the suffering of the world upon itself and
transforms it into something that merely multiplies that suffering.³⁶⁰

Shaping the confrontation with death and subsequent dissidence to logos is necessary
because only through self-dialogue can one break with ideas. The single act of suicide
has a rupture with life that cannot be challenged. In language, however, there is a front
line of battle which is capable of being redrawn as the conditions change. Consciousness
can be aware of death, and be ready to give up the mundane without requiring a will to
death.

Patočka talk of “the solidarity of the shaken, ” fits this view of death and sacrifice. The
shaken are those who understand that they can say no to the forces which make this
state of war continuous. They are those who can recapture the freedom of the front and,
by bringing the historical situation into doubt, affect change. Patočka claims,

The solidarity of the shaken is built up in persecution and uncertainty: that is
its front line, quiet, without fanfare or sensation even there where this ruling
Force seeks to seize it. It does not fear being unpopular but seeks it out and
calls out wordlessly. Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and

358 Ibid 364.

359 Ibid.

360 Ibid 364-365.

surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and its promises. All who betray this solidarity must realize that they are sustaining war and are the parasites on the sidelines who live off the blood of others.³⁶¹

Notice how the shaken “call out wordlessly.” I take this to mean that the shaken speak with Socratic irony. They give no position but reveal the folly in the position they are dissenting against. Patočka then invokes Heraclitus whom he claims saw his idea of war, that is a struggle for freedom, as a divine law which sustained life. Patočka calls this “the will to the freedom of risk in the *aristeia*.” The *aristeia* is the scene in an epic work where the hero has their finest moment e.g. Achilles kills Hector. Essentially, Patočka is asking people to risk their comfort in order for real peace. To be a sacrifice not for the things of life, but for life itself; to choose not to live if living means not living with the Good. Patočka is thus not advocating martyrdom. The irrational death of the martyr for a specific ideology overlooks the fact that we are finite human beings that are not reducible to calculable and therefore controllable beings. Hence, dying for ideological causes is not caring for the soul. Patočka means living responsibly, responsible for ourselves, for others, and for the world, because life is not about living in the sacrifice of others, nor about consuming finite resources.

I take the shaken in their solidarity, and their emphasis on sacrifice for responsibility, to be the driving idea behind Václav Havel’s essay ‘The Power of the Powerless.’ For Patočka, the philosopher has a duty to not remain silent about any noticed injustices. As Ucnik explains, this voice is most fitting despite what discomforts or lack of understanding from others might arise out of the discourse.³⁶² The power of the powerless, which is discussed in Chapter 1, laments the way in which people deliberately

³⁶¹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 135.

³⁶² Ucnik “Patočka Tecno-Power” 199.

live a lie in order to avoid discomfort at the hands of an ideology. The “aims of life” which for Havel is the search for authentic being, are ignored in favour of coerced behaviour and identity through the fearful intimidations of ideology. The power of the powerless is the power of the solidarity of the shaken. The community of the shaken is the powerless who say no to ideology.

Conclusion

This chapter has further explored Havel’s debt to Patočka philosophical thought and associated concepts of the expansion of the horizon of care and responsibility. Building on the discussion of the debt to Patočka in more general terms made in Chapter 3, I have demonstrated how many of the major themes of Patočka’s work find root in Havel. By describing Patočka’s debt to ancient Greek thought in Plato and Aristotle in defining his idea of care for the soul, I have shown that there is a strong pedigree in Havel’s notion of a life in truth. By describing Patočka’s idea that Aristotle had made Plato’s vertical transcendence out of the cave a horizontal movement, I claimed that Patočka opened the way for the kind of political philosophy espoused by Havel - a life devoted to speaking words of alarm at the current political situation, wherever necessary. Finally, I explored a call for action that is made explicit in Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* and is acted upon by Havel. Where Patočka describes the twentieth century as perpetual war and writes of a need to confront the night of death by suspending involvement with the mundane, Havel’s actions show a desire to create political change that seems to be analogous to Patočka’s call to action. Overall, I sought in this chapter to explain Havel’s dissent by drawing on some of the more intricate aspects of Patočka’s thought to show the intellectual debt to Patočka owed by Havel and to demonstrate how in acting as much as writing, Havel moved beyond Patočka’s thought and should be considered the more fully dissident figure. Because he wrote about events in the present, Havel’s

thought is indicative of Socratic politics - that is a constant questioning of the given, as what is given in a state of war must be fought with and against.

Chapter 5: Living in Truth as an Existential Concept

Introduction

Chapter 2 explained how the concept of a life in truth did not presuppose a metaphysical underpinning. This chapter will explore how a life in truth is best understood in existential terms.

A good way to understand Havel's idea of living in truth is through a comparison with Jean Paul's Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' from *Being and Nothingness*. A brief discussion exploring these Sartrean ideas will be illustrative because the functioning of bad faith as a lie to oneself that is not recognised as a lie is a good point of comparison for Havel's thoughts on life in truth. It is not clear that Havel closely studied Sartre's philosophy. There are two references to Sartre in *Letters to Olga*, and both are quoting famous lines that even those who have never read Sartre are likely to be aware of.³⁶³ Yet there are some striking similarities between Havel's writing and Sartre's philosophy. When, in *Letters to Olga*, Havel describes a news reader becoming aware of herself, on camera, as all of the other equipment fails around her – the description of the news reader's coming to self-awareness and her feeling of vulnerability are strikingly similar to Sartre's description of Antoine Roquentin's feeling of nausea as he has moments of existential revelation.³⁶⁴ Also in *Letters to Olga*, Havel recounts an existential awareness that he achieves whilst looking at and contemplating a tree.³⁶⁵ The sight of the tree gives him a sudden awareness that he finds difficult to describe in words, that the image of the

³⁶³ On (36) of *Letters to Olga*, Havel quotes the very famous line from Sartre's play *No Exit* "Hell is other people" and on page 336 Havel quotes Sartre as having written "man is the history of man". Sartre does not get referenced in *Open Letters*. Also there is small reference to Sartre in *Disturbing the Peace*; however it is not to any specific line or argument, just a mention of the fact that Sartre explicitly philosophizes in his plays (53).

³⁶⁴ Jean Paul- Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000).

³⁶⁵ Havel *Letters to Olga*, 221

tree against the sky and its movements revealed suddenly the entire history of Havel to himself. In encountering the tree, the finiteness of his existence is overcome as his childhood memories race back into his consciousness, which he expresses as a revelation of all he has ever been at once. Havel believes that he has encountered what he terms the memory of Being. For Havel, all events that have occurred are stored in the memory of Being, and the being of a person contains every event that has ever occurred. The individual subject is a part of the memory of Being. In describing the memory of Being, Havel writes;

Nothing that has once happened can un-happen; everything that once was, in whatever form, still is – forever lodged in the “memory of Being.” And everything we consider real, actual, present, is only a small and vaguely defined island in the ocean of “imaginary,” “potential” or “past” Being. It is from this matrix alone that it draws its substance and its meaning; only against this background can we experience it in the way we do. Along with everything that ever happened in whatever way (or could or should have happened) and what can now no longer un-happen, human personality, human existence too will endure, once and for all, in the “memory of Being.”

366

Havel's encounter with the tree takes him to the memory of Being, self-consciousness slips away, and he writes to his wife that he felt himself slipping into the abyss.

Compare this experience to Roquentin's encounter with a chestnut tree in *Nausea*. After sitting on a bench in a park, Roquentin examines a chestnut tree and finds that his

366 Ibid 139-140

description of the tree, its colour, shape etc, are descriptions of things which do not exist. The tree exists but the concept of colour, which he knows the tree as being constituted of, does not exist. The tree, for Roquentin, exists in an inexplicable way. Inexplicable because language cannot point to the tree as such, as it appears to consciousness, yet language, as the driver of consciousness keeps supplying names for the experience of the tree which are not the experience. Roquentin succumbs to the nausea that this realisation brings and sinks into the abyss of the absolute or what Sartre also calls, the absurd. What Roquentin comes to understand through his meditation on the tree, as Havel does, is that existence is a vast and overwhelming presence and that descriptions of existence are just masks for the absolute nothingness of existence. In each instance the experience is fundamentally different. Roquentin's attitude is towards the world, to the inexpressible thereness of things, and Havel's encounter is towards the totality of himself, towards his link to Being. Yet in each instance the encounter with the tree begins an investigation of Being. Havel's is fundamentally a positive experience and Sartre's is not.

It is telling that Havel, after Sartre, uses an encounter with a tree to describe a coming to an understanding of Being. However Havel is not, I think, a deep reader of Sartre. The comparison above shows that Havel too has similar existential concerns to Sartre, and the concept of bad faith takes this similarity further, although without betraying Havel as a closet reader of Sartre. I think what is most likely is that Sartre's fiction has been read and digested by Havel, who is a great reader of fiction, and the symbol of the tree, with its large roots and shimmering leaves, has captured Havel's imagination.

The Existential Nature of a Life in Truth

I want to situate Havel's life in truth amongst major existential phenomenological themes before undertaking the comparison to the specific theme of bad faith. The best

starting place would be Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* for showing the presence of phenomenological themes in Havel's life in truth. This is the starting point for Patočka, and hence is present in Havel, in some sense. Husserl writes,

...though the objects of the life-world, if they are to show their very own being, necessarily show themselves as physical bodies, this does not mean that they show themselves only in this way; and we...though we are related through the living body to all objects which exist for us, are not related to them solely as a living body...

...Thus in whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each "I-the-man" and all of us together belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this "living together."³⁶⁷

What Husserl is claiming is that man is essentially a being-in-the-world, but not just a physical body. Consciousness is transcendent of the physicality of the body in the sense that consciousness is not pure animal consciousness, i.e., consciousness of survival and reproduction and nothing else. The world we live in, the world conditioned by consciousness, is a communal world; hence responsibility is an important concept. That is we live in the world with others which implies that how we live in the world with others is an important question. This was an earlier theme in Husserl's work found in his *Kaizo*

³⁶⁷ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, (Evanston: Northwestern University press, 1970), 108.

articles.³⁶⁸ The article ‘Renewal: It’s problem and method’, is concerned with the idea of a society ethically renewing itself after the devastation of World War One. Husserl claims that “[w]e are men, free willing subjects who are actively engaged in our surrounding world, constantly involved in shaping it. Whether we want to or not, whether it is right or wrong, we act in this way.”³⁶⁹ Husserl’s aim is to ground action in a science of the *apriori* essences of the spiritual socio-ethical world. That means that the phenomenological method can be used to ground universal norms which are rationally founded on universal practical reason. Havel shares a similar aim; however he does not set out in to uncover the rational *apriori* ground of responsibility. Havel assumes there is such a ground. The point is that Havel is taking from the existential phenomenological tradition the key idea that authenticity comes through an inquiry into essences in the life-world.

Jeffner Allen notes that for Husserl, the distinguishing feature of the socioethical realm is that it is sustained in the inward consciousness of individuals in their mutual understanding of it.³⁷⁰ Allen also notes that for Husserl, renewal is an infinite task.³⁷¹ This infinite critique is clearly a part of Havel’s living in truth. Husserl’s claim is that the validity of the world is established in consciousness through this living with others. I think that Havel’s story of the greengrocer, explained in Chapter 1, has relevance here. The meaning of the world is established through the actions of the greengrocer with others. The ideology is supported by his complicity. Others see his obedience in placing the placard and the idea that the world is controlled by ideology is reinforced.

The previous chapter introduced the influence of Jan Patočka on Havel’s thought. I want to demonstrate the existential nature of Havel’s conception of living in truth by

368 Edmund Husserl “Renewal: It’s Problem and Method,” trans. Jeffner Allen, in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, (Notre Dame: Univeristy of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 326-331.

369 Ibid 326

370 Jeffner Allen, “Introduction to Husserl’s “Renewal: It’s Problem and Method,”” in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, (Notre Dame: Univeristy of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 324-325

371 Ibid 324.

showing Patočka's care for the soul's existential grounding. In *Plato and Europe*, Patočka writes that our life is in a constant state of crisis because human cognizing about the essential questions, such as good and evil, truth or untruth, can never be certain.³⁷² To discuss the positivity that Patočka locates in this crisis, it would be useful to introduce the existential understanding of transcendence that is a possession of what Sartre called the for-itself, or what Patočka would call the soul - of a certain faculty that allows a becoming of something that one currently is not. The soul can choose, in this crisis, to be in a constant conversation with itself; that is, to make itself aware of the crisis that comes from a lack of certainty and constantly rechoose, in the new situation, what is good and evil through careful deliberation. This is Patočka's conception of care for the soul. It is grounded in the specificity of a certain situation in a certain time and a certain place. In *Plato and Europe* Patočka is less concerned about what Being is, than in how beings appear or show themselves.³⁷³ This is because care for the soul is about evaluating the appearance of things. Hence care for the soul shows a trend in Patočka's existential phenomenology that is independent of epistemological concerns in phenomenology.³⁷⁴

There is a strong connection between care for the soul and Havel's living in truth. It is the critique of one's specificity which links the ideas together. A life in truth is mindful of time, place and circumstance; just consider the greengrocer whose act of living in truth would be to not place the slogan-filled placard. The transcendence described in *The Power of the Powerless* is clearly political and existential in nature. In the previous chapter, I came to the conclusion that a life in truth is about revealing the mendacious

³⁷² Patočka *Plato and Europe*, 136

³⁷³ Ibid 132

³⁷⁴ This is not to say that Patočka is solely to be considered an existential phenomenologist. Patočka writes extensively on problems of epistemology in phenomenology; however these concerns do not appear to have influenced Havel.

structures of ideology and not living by its coercions. In other words, a life in truth is about manifesting a concern with how things appear. It is about recognising that cognition is in a crisis with the manifold ways of showing that things in the world reveal. It is more importantly about an awareness and concern with the way that politics can influence this showing. It is from this explicit concern with the political that I tease out a Havelian standpoint from a Patočkean one. This is not to say, however, that for Patočka politics is not important. Rather my claim is that Havel is explicitly concerned with current, and actual appearances in the political sphere - this and nothing else - whereas Patočka is more the phenomenologist concerned primarily with the appearance of things in the life-world in a more general way.

This focus on real current events that defines Havel's writing and speeches is criticized by Karel Kosik in his article 'The Third Munich.' He argues that concern for realpolitik lacks imagination. He lumps Havel's party-free politics in with left and right wing ideologies as lacking real imagination.³⁷⁵ I think this is unfair. Kosik makes the point that "any politics that considers the cave its field of action sooner or later degenerates into a bad routine, into a politics not worthy of the name."³⁷⁶ I do not think that Havel, despite being concerned by the real political events happening around him, debases his thought. At all times Havel is careful to step back and consider his responsibility in the situation he is responding to. It is a credit to Havel that he manages to fuse together his concern for realpolitik and for moral theory.

It is my contention that Havel's writings on a life in truth contribute to an existential understanding of freedom and responsibility. The situatedness of a person, in history, in time, and in space which Havel's writings pre-suppose suggests that a life in truth is

375 Karel Kosik, "The third Munich" trans. Miloslav Bednar in *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*. No. 94 (Winter 1993-1994): 154

376 Ibid.

about realising transcendence in one's facticity. Havel's concern with authenticity under post-totalitarian conditions reminds me of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concern with freedom in Nazi-occupied France, explained in his essay 'The War has Taken Place'.³⁷⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, how people act together gives the world its meaning. He writes that anti-Semitism is not just a lie told by authorities and published by press who knew better; instead anti-Semitism was a world myth that was shared by the givers of the orders and ordered.³⁷⁸ That the non-Jewish French went from taking their freedom, and shared humanity for granted, to seeing the enemy as something else, and less valuable than themselves.³⁷⁹ He writes, "We have been led to take upon ourselves and consider as our own, not only our intentions – what our actions mean for us – but also the external consequences of these actions, what they mean in a historical context."³⁸⁰ Havel would fully agree with this sentiment, although for him, the state of politics does not need to be a state of war for this realisation. What took a war to awaken in Merleau-Ponty is brought to life in Havel through the experience of late-socialism. This has relevance in the current world situation because the simple unpacking of a life in truth, in the light of Husserl, Patočka and Merleau-Ponty is that an authentic being is one who recognises that actions have relevance in a historical context. They make the world valid in its sharedness. A life in truth critiques the validity of the world, sees the world as a problem, and exerts the transcendence which is a part of the human condition.

The next section will look at John Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith and make a comparison to a life in truth. If bad faith can be characterised as the failure to recognise

377 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The War has Taken place" in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine & Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University press, 2007), 41-54

378 Ibid 44-45.

379 Ibid.

380 Ibid 46-47.

freedom then there is rich material for a comparison with a life in truth whose opposite, living a lie, could be defined as a refusal to recognise freedom.

Comparison of Havel's Thoughts on Language to 'Bad Faith'

When individuals live according to the dictates of an ideology out of fear, Havel argues that they are living a lie. Living a lie could also be described as wilfully accepting that the way in which things and others appear in the political world is fixed. In essence, I argue, that living a lie is a rejection of transcendence as an aspect of the soul. The certainty with which the person living a lie thinks that things cannot be otherwise leads me to think that the existential nature of a life in truth and a life in a lie would be well elucidated through a comparison with John-Paul-Sartre's idea of bad faith.

Bad faith is explained in Sartre's, *Being and Nothingness*. The definition supplied in the work is:

A lie to oneself exists within the unity of a single consciousness. Through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-itself.

Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them.³⁸¹

In bad faith, persons sees themselves as a thing in the world. An example Sartre uses to explain the vacillation between transcendence and facticity is of a woman on a first date who refuses to recognise the compliments of her date as a desire by him for sexual intercourse. When he takes her hand, she does not feel her hand in relation to the man's intentions for the rest of her body and instead postpones the anguish of having to make

381 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, (London: Routledge, 2001), 629

a choice about whether or not to engage in intercourse with her date. She contrives not to think about the hand-holding and leaves her hand passive and inert in his. Sartre's point is that she is enjoying the flirting without wanting to think of it as flirting; that the man's suddenly taking hold of her hand threatens this understanding of the situation, and dissociating from her hand is the best way of maintaining her enjoyment without acknowledging the man's sexual intent.

Human freedom, for Sartre, is felt through anguish - that is, through a recognition that a nothingness slips in-between my present and my past, and my present and my future. This leaves me to choose my future and to judge my past.³⁸² We can flee from this anguish, which, as in Kierkegaard's writing, is a fear of something inside the self. We can turn ourselves into a Not.³⁸³ As a Not, the anguish of freedom is escaped. Bad faith, for Sartre, is a difficult phenomenon to describe, and he will call it an evanescent state, because it seemingly annihilates itself. Because bad faith is a lie to oneself, it presupposes that the self knows the truth that is being hidden. Consciousness is conscious of the hiding of truth, which is the normal phenomenon of lying when a person lies to another person. Hence, it seems unreasonable that bad faith can exist, because the self would have to know of its existence. This is why Sartre called bad faith evanescent, or 'metastable' because the affect of nothingness that surrounds the being of consciousness should reveal the lie, and hence restore a condition of good faith. But not always. Sartre argues that bad faith can exist for an entire life time, as a person flees anguish. It is in this paradoxical state that bad faith exists. We are free, in bad faith, to deny ourselves the freedom which is our being. This denial is the self, pretending its character is fixed and unchangeable.

³⁸² Ibid 45.

³⁸³ Ibid 47.

Is living a lie, in Havel's thought, similar to Sartre's bad faith? Both involve the lying to oneself, and both posit the existence of a veiled truth (of sorts) which one hides from oneself. This is a difficult question to answer because Sartre is not altogether clear on the exact nature of bad faith. The structure of bad-faith, as a lie told to oneself to fix one's identity, is very similar to 'life in a lie'. One adopts ideological language to fix one's life within ideology. The fear of the loss of the comforts of life, that for Havel motivate living a lie, do fail to recognise the possibility of changing one's character, as in Sartre's conception of bad faith. However the sense of anguish at the recognition of the freedom we possess to change our states is not present in a life in a lie.

The story of the greengrocer from *The Power of the Powerless* which was discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis bears upon the absence of metaphysics in Havel's political philosophy. The greengrocer's lack of dissent seemingly stems from a fear of being reported to a warden, and a subsequent fear of negative consequences for acting against the ideology's determination. In this case the greengrocer deliberately hides his freedom which Havel, like Sartre, argues is the ground of his existence. The greengrocer carries in his consciousness a sense of himself as a puppet. He tells himself, 'I must behave this way.' To put the story of the greengrocer in terms of Sartre's philosophy, the greengrocer sees himself as an Other and cannot facilitate the knowledge that he has freedom to choose another project. This is because he has, through the vision of himself as Other, identified as an instrument rather than as freedom. The fear of negative consequences makes the greengrocer feel that he is bound to his set of circumstances and hence he escapes the feeling of anguish at having to choose how to act. Instead he thinks he is bound to in his circumstances. The story fits bad faith. The greengrocer is in bad faith, yet Havel is not primarily concerned in the story with the greengrocer's flight from anguish. For Havel It is not a fear of confronting one's freedom that drives the greengrocer to complicity, it is the comfort of the crowd. I don't think that Havel fully

shares Sartre's concept of anguish; at least he doesn't give it the prominence Sartre gives it in *Being and Nothingness*. (At times Havel seems bemused that people act in bad faith, or choose to live a lie.)

Freedom for Havel is not anguish, it is somewhat ecstatic. In *The Power of the Powerless* Havel writes that the essential aims of life - freedom to be a dignified human being - are naturally present in every person. More than that, when this freedom is taken away, or hidden away by ideological manipulation of a being's identity, there is a longing for this "rightful dignity."³⁸⁴ In fact, the very first paragraph of the essay is a statement by Havel about the inevitability of dissent returning humanity to a more dignified position. Leaving aside ideological manipulation does not reveal existence to be an anguished state, but a homecoming. The above comparison of Havel's and Sartre's similar encounter with a tree demonstrates that whereas the tree brought on a feeling of nausea for Sartre's protagonist, for Havel the feeling is one of elation - something he had been longing for and was delighted to have discovered. Like Plato's forms, Havel's authentic Being calls to the self.

Perhaps this lack of emphasis on anguish by Havel can be explained by the context in which he is writing. Freedom is not anguish in *Letters to Olga*, because to Havel, in prison, the idea of freedom is hard to associate with a negative emotion. Some part of the self, free from coercion or social construction must have seemed radiantly positive to him. Were the greengrocer to choose to act against the system, and live in truth, it would not be to face up to a horrible anguish of making that choice; it would be to enrich the political situation by revealing to others their own freedom. For Havel, the bad faith of living a lie is closely related to the critique of technology derived from Heidegger.³⁸⁵ Havel moves past Sartre's existential and psychological account of lying to oneself and gives it

³⁸⁴ Havel, *Power of Powerless*, 38.

³⁸⁵ The discussion of Heidegger's critique of technology is covered in Chapter one of this thesis.

a political and moral dimension. For Sartre, bad faith is a way of dealing with anguish, it is not a moral failure. There is something of Sartre's view in Havel's announcement that when a totalitarian system manipulates ideology, people wrap their identity in ideological language and behaviour to maintain some semblance of ease in their life. This is not to avoid anguish at feeling the nothingness behind human action, rather it is to avoid physical or social punishment.³⁸⁶

Havel notes that when the greengrocer places the placard in his window, there is no immediate identification with the semantic content of the sign.³⁸⁷ The dissident can employ language which is once used to deceive the self and can be used to undeceive the self, to awaken the idea of freedom in others. The historical situation, which Sartre says the subject erroneously feels bound to in bad faith, in Havel is something to be opposed. Freedom is not absolute, but one can dissent from the historical reality. The dissident can write a pamphlet or organize a reading of dissident material, or challenge a legal ruling made on ideological grounds. In so doing he or she denies, (in Sartre's terminology; 'negate,') the reality of the ideology which is defining the historical situation. The language of bad faith, for Havel, is the way in which individuals adopt bureaucratic and ideological language and anchor their identity to the false discourse this language perpetuates. It is a willing choice to employ semantic content that one has no attachment to. In this sense one is always aware that one is lying. It is fear that motivates the lie rather than an avoidance of anguish, whereas for Sartre fear of freedom is what motivates bad faith.

Bad faith is described by Sartre as seeking to "flee the in-itself by means of the inner disintegration of my being."³⁸⁸ That is, in bad faith consciousness flees what it is, or

³⁸⁶ Havel, *Power of Powerless*, 28.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 70

becomes a lie of itself. In order to ensure that it is not recognised as a lie, bad faith “denies this very disintegration as it denies that it itself is bad faith.”³⁸⁹ Good faith, on the other hand, flees from the disintegration of being, that is from being what one is not, to being what one is –an authentic for-itself. But within consciousness is this tendency to flee the authentic and become in bad faith. Hence even good faith will, without great resistance, become bad faith. Exactly what actions one should perform, is not an issue for the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* for whom it makes no difference whether one sits alone in a room and drinks or organises the masses to resist foreign occupation in the sense that one is equally free to do both.³⁹⁰ Rather the issue for Sartre is that recognise the freedom to act, and in so doing act in good faith. For Sartre the action which comes out of good faith, in recognition of the anguish of freedom, is an action that is responsible for itself. The action out of bad faith lacks this responsibility. This is the extent of Sartre’s moralising. Franz Adler writes that:

Sartre's view of moral responsibility corresponds to the scientist's view that there is no valid basis in science for the selection of values. Man can live in our world, which is rapidly growing secularized, without going to pieces only if he is willing to admit to himself that there is no generally accepted value system available in his culture and that he must make an independent choice of himself.³⁹¹

I agree with Adler. The Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, whom I am analyzing in this chapter, is not a political Sartre. There is a clear absence of moral concern in *Being and*

389 Ibid.

390 Franz Adler, “The Social Thought of Jean-Paul Sartre” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 55, no.3 (November 1949):1 288

391 Ibid.

Nothingness which is an excellent counterpoint to Havel's obvious concern for moralizing. I am offering this brief discussion of bad and good faith because, for Havel, being authentic is better understood in terms of this fleeing from self-disintegration.

For Sartre, the fleeing from a self-disintegration is a fleeing from alienation and the feeling of anguish in an alienated being. However for Sartre, when one lets go of bad faith there is also, alongside the anguish, something wonderful occurring. Sartre writes, "There is a certain type of flight before facticity, a flight which consists precisely in abandoning oneself to this facticity, that is... in trustingly reassuming it and loving it in order to try and recover it."³⁹² For Sartre our actions have value because they are chosen in anguish.³⁹³ The natural ambiguity of the self, (in Sartre's terms, its radical freedom,) for Havel is an event only to be celebrated – the anguish is absent and replaced by a concern for doing things truthfully, but this concern is not anguish. The multiplicity, complexity and ambiguity of the self is something that Havel revels in. For Havel, the 'I' can be understood as a search for meaning.³⁹⁴ The I has within it a longing for a "being in Being" – this longing stems from the 'I's' thrownness from Being and it's thrownness in the world. Through some experiences, for Havel, the 'I' has moments of meaning, which he describes in a really nice way, as being like a series of connected lanterns throwing light on our relationship to Being. Far from fleeing from anguish and alienation, for Havel, recognising freedom and feeling "spellbound" by the possibility of freedom is the surest means of feeling joy in the presence of Being.

Freedom is the means through which Being in Being is found. He writes to Olga:

³⁹² Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, 456

³⁹³ John Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a humanism" in Walker Kaufman (ed) *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975).

³⁹⁴ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 333

Being spellbound within me and Being spellbound within the world can join hands anytime, anywhere and in any way: when I look into the crown of the tree or into someone's eyes, when I succeed in writing you a good letter, when I am moved by an opera on television, when a passage from Levinas sets my head swirling, when our visits work out, when I understand the meaning of my compassion for the weather woman, when I help someone or someone helps me, when something important happens, or when nothing important happens at all. But whenever and however it happens, such moments tend to be rare and fleeting. Given the contradictory nature of separated Being, it can't be any other way and it is right that it should be so: after all, the uniqueness and the unpredictability of such moments combine to create their meaning: it is the meaning of "islands of meaning" in the ocean of our struggling, the meaning of lanterns whose light is cast into the darkness of our life's journey, illuminating all the many meanings of its direction.³⁹⁵

To paraphrase Havel's sentiment in the above section in Sartrean terms, the search for good faith, or the full acknowledgement of freedom, gives the self moments of real meaning, of close and authentic connection to the events and phenomena of one's life. These moments of meaning add up to a collection of "islands of meaning", which give the self an authentic relationship to the memory of being. That is, for Havel, all events in the past are real existent events and the freedom of a person gives a person meaning, rather than anguish, in their recognition in the free creation of those phenomenon which comprise the past. For Havel, acting in a way that is most fitting to a particular situation and then doing what is most fitting, is determined through a mixture of intuition and the

395 Ibid 333-334

phenomenological critique of the life-world; and as each situation differs extensively, each action will be different. The understanding of freedom is therefore not analogous in the two thinkers in the sense that Sartre claims that freedom is something that the self runs from and for Havel it is something that calls to the self. Nonetheless, Sartre's language of bad faith can go some way to clarifying Havel's thoughts on what exactly a life in truth is, as there are also similarities.

Rather than giving strict definition of good faith, good faith can be, in Havel's thought, illustrated through the mechanism of good faith as the negation of bad faith – fleeing towards what one is.³⁹⁶ Havel's description of the thrown state of being is half in and half out of being - as he terms it, being-in-Being.³⁹⁷ That is, a being is linked to the horizon of meaning, that is its transcendence, out of which it is thrown into its facticity. In other words, I take Havel's analysis of thrownness and separation to be a conception of our lives as lying between our facticity, our responsibility, and what we can become. This is illustrated in *Letters to Olga* when Havel writes:

On the one hand we are constantly exposed to the temptation to stop asking questions and adapt ourselves to the world as it presents itself to us, to sink into it, to forget ourselves in it, to lie our way out of ourselves and our "otherness" and thus to simplify our existence-in-the-world. At the same time we are persuaded over and over again that we can only reach toward meaning within the dimensions of this world, as it lies before us, by being open to the opening out of meaning within the world.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ See Chapter 2 for a discussion on how a life in truth is better understood as a rejection of ideological coercion rather than a defined state.

³⁹⁷ Havel *Letters to Olga* 324.

³⁹⁸ Ibid 320.

Despite being thrown into a world, the I longs to make sense of the world and to return to what Havel terms the integrity of Being, which, he writes, is experienced as meaningfulness. The experience of meaningfulness in the integrity of Being is Havel's version of good faith, or being conscious of living a life in truth.

For Sartre, good faith is consciously choosing one's actions and accepting full responsibility for them. It is relating to the in-itself aware of the full manner of its appearance. For Havel, being authentic, involves becoming aware of what Sartre calls one's facticity or what Havel calls one's relationship to the world of appearances and in so doing, becoming aware of one's freedom to be one's transcendence.

Facticity and Responsibility in 'Audience'

Facticity is another useful concept for explaining Havel's thought. It is analogous to Havel's idea that one is responsible for one's past. In Sartre's philosophy, facticity is the relationship of the for-itself to the in-itself. It is consciousness's relationship to its past and its concrete situation. This section will explore facticity, freedom and responsibility in Havel's play *Audience*, from the 'Vanek' trilogy. The Vanek trilogy is a series of plays with the central character of Vanek being a somewhat autobiographical character. Vanek is a playwright dissident who in *Audience*, the first of the trilogy, is placed in a brewery to work and is asked by the manager to report on his friends in exchange for an easier job. Vanek refuses, claiming that he cannot abandon his principles.

Facticity reveals the ineluctability of both freedom and throwness. Havel's strong charge with responsibility comes from the understanding that awareness of throwness and awareness of freedom generate the possibility of reforming the thrown state to bring the separated halves of Being together in authenticity. The character Vanek, confronts the facticity of his situation - as a brewery worker whilst acknowledging the truth of his dissident past, and when invited to seek comfort in the possibility of easier work and

increased consumption of alcohol, he flees from the desire for a comfortable life in which he would simply melt into the 'they'. His comfort would come through a simple choice to use language irresponsibly and say what the authorities want to hear. He has been asked by the brewery owner to provide information on his dissident friend's activities even if that information is false; to just say something to get the authorities off the brewery owners back and hence make his own position much more comfortable. However, for Vanek, the possibility of being irresponsible to Being by adding to the false use of language in the memory of Being and reinforcing the ideological restrictions on his freedom, is too high a price. In his recognition of both his freedom and his thrownness, Vanek chooses to remain silent on his friend's activities and to live by his "principles".

In all of his communications Vanek is careful to remain authentic. This care is the manifestation of his freedom despite the political limitations placed on him by the regime which has confined him to the brewery for work. Conversely the manager of the brewery is in bad faith. He ignores the possibility that the regime might, in future, target him in the way they are targeting Vanek. He thinks only of the present possibility of a more comfortable personal situation. He tells himself that he is not free and must succumb to the political demands placed on him whilst simultaneously recognizing the freedom to be political that is his possibility. He exhibits the paradoxical nature of bad faith that Sartre describes with his example of the waiter.³⁹⁹ The example of the waiter, who acts too much like a waiter, for Sartre, shows that paradoxically, in choosing to act like a waiter and in acting like a mechanism, or an "automaton," he recognises his freedom. The Brewery master, in choosing to deny that he has principles, reveals that he has principles.

What is quite brilliant about the play *Audience* is the way that the foreman is brought to confront his facticity through the non-compliance of Vanek. He admits his intention to

³⁹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 59.

spy on Vanek and even asks him to be complicit in his informing – all without acknowledging his freedom to not inform. He sees himself as compelled to comply with the regime and hence remains in bad faith for the refusal to consider his freedom. What is significant for me is that in *Audience*, the difference between bad and good faith seems wholly tied to the responsible use of language.

A small example will make this clearer. Vanek thanks his boss and his boss says, ‘and all you’ll have to do is report on your activities and your friends for me because the secret police are asking me to spy on you.’ Vanek responds that he couldn’t do it, that it would be inauthentic of him to even make up a report he could give the police. The brewery master gets angry. He yells,

You bloody intellectuals... Fine gentlemen, sprouting words. You can afford to, because you always come out on top, you’re interesting, you always know how to wriggle out of things, you’re on top, even when you’re down, but an ordinary bloke like me can work his bloody fingers to the bone and what has he got to show for it – sweet fanny adams – that’s what – no one to turn to, everybody does him down, everybody gives him the boot, everybody has a go at him, he leads a bloody miserable life, and then what – a gent like you comes along and says that I have no principles. You’d take a nice cushy job from me, wouldn’t you, but a bit of the dirt I’ve got to wade through every day, that you don’t want. You’re a clever lot, you are, very clever, oh yes you know what all right, you can take good care of your bloody selves. Principles! I’m not surprised you hang on to your bloody principles – they come in handy, don’t they, you know how to make a mint out of them you do, they give you a living – but what about me? Nobody gives me a hand, nobody is scared of me, nobody writes about me, nobody gives a blind bit of notice what I do, I’m just about good enough to shovel the muck out of which your principles can grow,

I'm good to find you cosy warm spots for you to play the hero in, and what do I get for all that – nothing but a raspberry. One fine day you will go back to your actresses, you'll boast about the time you worked here rolling barrels, showing off what a big fine he-man you are – but what about me heh? What about me? I aint got nowhere to go back to have I? Where can I go? Who'll take any notice of me? Who cares what I do? What has life got to offer me? What about my future? ⁴⁰⁰

It's a scathing criticism and definitely one to note because of the honesty of it. What do lofty principles mean for the ordinary citizen involved in the machinations of the mundane? What is the point of principles for the worker who feels the butt of the joke no matter what regime signs the pay-cheques? But there is something somewhat eschatological in this speech worth noting as well. The foreman says that Vanek will return to his position, hinting that he intuits the eventual end of the current order. What he fails to feel though, is any kind of telos in that eschatology. For him, it will remain the same. When he breaks down in his depression, he invokes the very things that Vanek has rejected on principle: comfort, a career, in short, hopes and aspirations for a comfortable life. This relates to the theory of the previous chapter which describes Patočka's pronouncement that the wars of the twentieth century have culminated in a war for peace. For this chapter though, the significance of the desires of the brewery master lie in their direction at comfort and complicity with the ideology.

What is also worth noting is that there is a freedom in Vanek. Whether the order ends or not is insignificant because Vanek is not a part of it; he is risking comfort for the sake of authentic life. But the foreman remains unmoved by Vanek's example. Vanek's actions

400 Václav Havel, "Audience," trans. George Theiner, in *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 208-209.

are an unconscious example to the foreman; that is, despite the persecution and lack of understanding on the foreman's part, Vanek's principles have an effect that isn't immediately cognized by the foreman. That doesn't make them useless. Far from it. The good of Vanek's actions is in refusal to be complicit.

Conclusion

The idea that one needs to confront the actuality of a situation in order to recognise the freedom that one possess to change it, was compared in this chapter to Sartre's idea of bad faith. The claim that Havel read Sartre cannot be made confidently. However, there is enough of a thematic similarity to utilise Sartre's thought to shed light on the intricacies of Havel's thought and to show that in many ways Havel's existentialism comes up with very different answers to a questioning of freedom and transcendence.

Chapter 6: Havel's Concern for Meaningful Political Discourse

Introduction

The political use of language is a major concern of Havel's political philosophy. In particular, Havel is concerned with the political effect of language, an effect that stems from a manipulation of historical meaning by an ideology or an individual. The theme of the political effect of language emerges in Havel's work, and an account of it is absent in much of the literature on Havel's thought. This chapter will describe Havel's thoughts about the political significance of language and lay the foundation for that discussion in the next chapter. The exploration will be based on my reading of a selection of Havel's plays, speeches, essays, and letters. Through an analysis of these writings it will be made clear that language is a major concern of Havel's.

Havel scholarship mostly misses the concern with language in Havel's political philosophy. There are two exceptions. One is James Pontusso's *Václav Havel; Civic Responsibility in the Postmodern Age*, which contains a short analysis of Havel's dissident views on the distortion of meaning by ideology and which will be expanded upon in this chapter. The other is Martin Matušík's *Postnational Identity; Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel*. I will build on Pontusso's and Matušík's discussion by looking at a broad range of Havel's writings over his long career to show that throughout his life as dissident, playwright and politician, the political significance of discourse has never been far from his mind.

Havel's Writings and Thoughts Regarding Language

Throughout Havel's writing, language is seen as a political phenomenon. In his first major speech, delivered to the union of Czechoslovakian Writers, Havel lambasts the

organisation which is responsible for allocating funding to literary projects for its selectively privileging safe and homogenous literary styles. It thereby manipulates the political sphere with a stagnating force. The speech has been published as the essay, 'On Evasive Thinking.'⁴⁰¹ The opening of the speech has Havel paraphrase a newspaper article that chastises citizens for complaining about window ledges falling in the centre of Prague, causing deaths. The writer urges citizens to focus on the good points of progress in Czechoslovak living conditions and to illustrate his point he notes that women now wear the latest fashions from the streets of Paris rather than the grim grey clothes usually associated with socialist homogenising of fashion. The problem for Havel is that the author of the article is trying to make citizens forget or evade thinking about the very real issue of falling window ledges. The article employs language manipulatively to institute what Havel terms 'evasive thinking.' Women's fashions have nothing to do with the issue of poor building maintenance. For Havel, there is a responsibility to use language to point to things as they really are. This is not a metaphysical attempt to uncover things in themselves, but to reveal things as they appear to us. That language can change the manner of appearance of an object is a cause for concern as well as for hope. Hence Havel is distrustful of the manipulative nature of language, yet hopeful of a language that can possibly enliven the political sphere. I am reminded of an old soviet joke that illustrates Havel's concern. Two farmers are looking at a tractor with a broken wheel, one farmer laments, 'It is useless, the wheel is broken.' The other farmer retorts, 'You are looking at this all wrong comrade; three wheels are working fine.'⁴⁰² The suggestion of the joke is that simply by changing the language that describes the situation, the understanding of the situation changes.

401 Havel, Open Letters, 10-24.

402

The newspaper article that evades discussion of falling window ledges is a real example of the absurd worlds of Havel's plays. That language can shape and distort the manner in which a thing appears to consciousness is quite a point of interest for Havel. He highlights his interest in this in *Disturbing the Peace*.

I'm interested in [language's] ambivalence, its abuse: I'm interested in language as something that fashions life, destinies, and worlds; language as the most important skill; language as a ritual and a magic charm; the word as a carrier of dramatic movement, as something that legitimizes, as a way of self-affirmation and self-projection. I am interested in clichés and their meaning in a world where verbal evaluation, inclusion in a phraseological context, linguistic interpretation are often more important than reality itself, and "real reality" merely derives from clichés.⁴⁰³

Havel is not promoting the control that language has over a perception of real events. Instead his plays are a means of drawing attention to the problematic nature of language, thereby unsettling the audience into a state of reflection on their own interaction in the world.

Matušík notes that for Havel, "words always deceive unless they are rooted in one's thinking and acting."⁴⁰⁴ Matušík makes an excellent point that when the use of language in discourse is rooted in such a way, it becomes, for Havel, possible to talk to other individuals as individuals.⁴⁰⁵ Havel's refusal to identify with slogan-like words such as what the term 'socialism' had become, or how 'capitalism' was being used at the the

⁴⁰³ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 193

⁴⁰⁴ Martin Matušík, *Postnational Identity; Critical theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel*, (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 248

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

end of the revolution, for Matušík displays Havel's concern for existentially authentic language, not a concern for using the correct definitions of words. It is what the speaker wishes to say that is important, not what the technical meaning of the words used are.⁴⁰⁶ The following sections will analyse Havel's plays to describe how his views on language inform his political philosophy. Matušík begins to briefly analyse Havel's play *The Memorandum* to show its concern for existentially authentic discourse; it is my aim to extend this analysis.⁴⁰⁷

The Garden Party

Havel's play *The Garden Party* is a perfect example of his interest in, and critique of, language. It is a difficult play due to the constant twists and turns of language usage by characters. Even characterisation is difficult to fathom as characters take on roles of other characters mid-dialogue simply by taking over another character's conversation. In the opening scene, the protagonist, Hugo Pludek, is playing chess with himself whilst his father and mother attempt to give him life advice in the form of muddled clichés. As Hugo jumps from side to side of the chess table he is repeatedly asked how he is going. Depending on which side of the table he is standing, he says either, 'badly' or 'really well.' The point, at this moment of the play, is the deceptive nature of language use: how, to draw on the earlier joke, the tractor can either have one broken wheel, or three working ones. Both are correct and true statements, and this illustrates the point that simply calling ideology a form of lying is too simple. In the play, the audience is positioned to be unsettled by the exchange. All the relevant statements are true; none of

406 Ibid 247-249.

407 Ibid 248.

them indicate what is really going on. This is a persistent theme in the play and is well illustrated by an example from the text where Hugo is finishing the game of chess.

Hugo: Super, Mum! (Makes his move) Checkmate!

Pludek: You lost?

Hugo: No, I won.

Mrs Pludek: You won.

Hugo: No, I lost.⁴⁰⁸

Rather than gaining an insight into the nature of any character, it seems that the discourse has a stronger presence than the characters. The personalities of the characters are lost in multiple meanings and broken clichés.

A strong example of a loss of characterisation takes place when a clerk and secretary, attempting to have a real conversation after the prompting of a motivational inaugurator, give up and return to the mechanistic and meaningless use of paradoxes and muddled clichés. For example, at the prompting of the inaugurator who keeps appearing and asking how the conversation is going, the two have a conversation about what is immediately before them in the garden.

Clerk: Look-

Secretary: Yes?

Clerk: Look – a sparrow! It's flying – moss blossoms – meadows are a-
humming – nature!

Secretary: What?

⁴⁰⁸ Havel, "Garden Party," 7

Clerk: I say, sparrows are flying – the boss mlossoms – the meadows are a-humming –

Secretary: Oh, I see – nature!

Clerk: Yes. Well now. You have hair! It's pretty – gold – like buttercrumbs – I mean buttercups – and your nose is like a rose – I'm sorry – I mean like a forget-me-not – white –

Secretary: Look - a sparrow.⁴⁰⁹

My reading of this fragment is as a declining move away from the sight of the sparrow into a muddled mess of a conversation, with mixed up clichés and a complete failure to describe what is seen. The conversation continues in this way until the Clerk responds to the Secretary, “The Large Dancefloor A is indeed large. I admire the courage with which it has been revealed to us.”⁴¹⁰ The absurdity of this conversation should be read within the context that the inaugurator is encouraging free conversation to promote motivation at work. Read in this light the whole garden party is an ideologically controlled life. People feel they are living, but are mere cogs in an ideological machine which is turned by a false identification by the characters with work rather than with what Havel might term the real aims of life. Hence the failed attempt to describe the sparrow and the flowers becomes a comfort taken in the ideology's interpretation of the size of the dance floor, a matter the two had been debating for some time previously in a glut of bureaucratic language. Ultimately, as the secretary and the clerk identify with the language of their profession, they fail to have a real conversation about a phenomenon as it is.

Indeed it is as if no specific character is even necessary in the play for any role as all it takes to become another person is to start speaking for them. The ritual that sustains the

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid 18.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

ideology is more important than the individual performing it. This point is explained very clearly in *Power of the Powerless* where Havel, writing about the greengrocer, remarks that the greengrocer need not believe the slogan. He just has to obey the dictate to place the placard in his window.⁴¹¹ This is supported in the play where, at one point, whilst awaiting one of the father's friends to take Hugo under his wing, the father remarks "If he doesn't come, somebody else will."⁴¹² Indeed, in a Beckett-like manner, the person they are waiting for never arrives and Hugo is sent to find him. The man is shown to be unnecessary for Hugo's future, Hugo rises through the bureaucratic institutions where the father's friend works simply by assuming other people's roles, even as those other people are performing them. All he has to do is to adopt their language and take over their speech. In other words, life under ideology, removes the importance of the individual by placing significance on certain ideological words being spoken by any individual. That is, it does not matter who is speaking as long as someone is speaking the discourse which sustains the ideology. The loss of self is taken to extreme measures in the final act of the play as Hugo arrives home from his new job, awaiting the return of Hugo, asking, as the door bell rings, if that is himself. Hugo has lost a sense of self identity because he has assumed a role in the machine of the ideology which has demanded a certain kind of speech and this has taken Hugo away from his authentic self.

Such a reading of *The Garden Party* is supported by Paul Trensky, who writes that

[Havel] shares with other absurdist playwrights the conception of modern man's identity as a vacuum; consequently, man can become anything at any

411 Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, 31. I have already discussed this example in Chapter 1: however the example is also apt here.

412 Havel "Garden Party," 8

time, depending largely on the influences to which he is exposed. All his characters are soulless, mechanical creatures who are formed and defined only by their environment. The human world is an impersonal world in which humans are exchangeable.⁴¹³

I share with Trensky the idea that the language of the play, or its manipulation, is more important than the characters. For Trensky, words loom as a threatening presence in the play and give the impression that they could take over the play and their victims.⁴¹⁴

Another point made by Trensky, which I use as scholarly support for my own reading of the play, is that language in the play is purely mechanical.⁴¹⁵

If anything can be made clear in *The Garden Party*, it is that the chess-playing Hugo has an identity, even if the act of playing chess by oneself at first appears absurd. It is entering the world of work within the bureaucratic institutions of 1960's Czechoslovakia that is the really absurd situation. Adopting and performing the ridiculous roles that are required in this secondary world are what constitutes the truly absurd for Havel. These roles are prescribed, and have a set nomenclature to assist the definition. Alienation springs, not from a pluralism within the self – the two-sided chess player – but out of the abandonment of the pluralistic self in the bureaucratic structures and bureaucratic language of work. The final piece of dialogue from Hugo is an exasperating statement of the human condition.

413 Goetz-Stankewitz & Carey, *Critical Essays*, 161

Paul Trensky, "Havel's *The Garden Party* Revisited" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, ed. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co.), 1999, 161.

414 Ibid.

415 Ibid 163.

Hugo: ...I don't know whether you want to be or not to be; but I know I want to be all the time and that's why all the time I must a little bit not be. You see, man when he is from time to time a little bit not is not diminished thereby! And if at the moment I am – relatively speaking – rather not, I assure you that soon I might be much more than I've ever been – and then we can have another chat about all these things, but on an entirely different platform. Checkmate!⁴¹⁶

The account of Kenneth Zagacki on folly and irony in Havel's political speeches as President can serve here as an explanation for the above passage.⁴¹⁷ Zagacki mentions Raymond Aron's position on life under oppressive conditions that under such conditions, individuals become "frantic or resigned, prisoners of an implacable fatality, the playthings of an inhuman force."⁴¹⁸ Hugo Pludek's loss of self through a frantic use of bureaucratic language fits Aron's description. His exasperation at not recognising himself is a result of him relating to himself through the force of ideology rather than through self critique. Zagacki's point is that in Havel there is an emphasis on humility. He argues that humility for Havel is the starting point for any liberation from the fatality of the "inhuman force."⁴¹⁹ Zagacki writes that this push for humility in Havel is a discourse on folly - on the inability of human consciousness to fully understand any position. Hence out of humbleness comes a space where real self reflection can happen because the false certainty of ideological self discourse is replaced with a humble recognition of uncertainty – a Socratic knowledge of not knowing. Zagacki writes,

416 Havel, "The Garden Party," 51

417 Kenneth Zagacki, "Václav Havel and the Rhetoric of Folly" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, ed. Marketa Goetz- Stankiewicz & Phyllis Carey, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co.), 1999, 127-142.

418 Ibid 136.

419

...Havel's discourse on folly encourages a consciousness of human frailty and "meekness" which places Havel and his audience in a position to transcend themselves and act in unique ways... He appears to use humility to open a heretofore impossible realm of political possibility.⁴²⁰

Hugo Pludek's line that in order to be he must sometime not be is on my reading an obvious call for humility. His rejection of the kind of speaking that got him his employment can be read as a return to humility as he claims that he is at that moment "not" and there is also the hope that because at that moment he is in a mode of self-critique he will later be "much more than he has ever been." I think that Havel is implicitly saying that the language employed by the characters is only supporting the ideology and that a self-critique, engaged internally, is the solution to ideology's control over language.

Trensky, in contrast to my view, sees Hugo's final speech as a tirade against dialectics. There is plausibility in this view, but I don't agree, since the didactic flavour of the speech stands out strongly. In Trensky's interpretation, the final scene shows the play to be a critique of "man's obsession with thinking in categories which prevent him from facing ultimate realities and therefore also tending to undermine his ethical self-awareness."⁴²¹ I agree with Trensky on this point; however, I read the final speech as a much more explicit statement by the character that this is what the play is about rather than seeing it as implicit because the play criticises the dialectical method.

Another point that *The Garden Party* suggests is that performing a definite and prescribed role, by adopting the appropriate forms of language and reductively identifying humanity with that role, is the root cause of alienation. Havel is retelling a version of Nietzsche and Heidegger's critique of metaphysics. In fact the above quoted speech is

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Trensky, "Havel's *The Garden Party*," 171.

prefigured by Hugo declaring that “the time of static and unchangeable categories is past.”⁴²² Hence Havel, like Heidegger and Patočka, is doing philosophy (albeit in the form of drama in Havel’s case) in a post-metaphysical world. The central concern of *The Garden Party* is also found in Havel’s philosophical writings. A life in truth, according to the ideas advanced in *The Garden Party*, is a life undetermined by a job role or a colour of a chess piece; it is a life open to a plurality of experience and a shifting, ambiguous identity. This is a little more naive than the explication of a life in truth in later essays, yet very much along the same lines. Havel’s intention is to create in the audience an awareness of the absurdity of the roles they themselves perform as mirrors of Hugo, using language in a way that promotes alienation as the language of their roles causes them to sink further into the ‘they.’ The language employed in sustaining the machinations of ideology obscures the self’s identity to the self. This thereby incites an inquiry into the mendacious nature of life under post-totalitarian ideology.

The Memorandum

The same exploration on the absurd use of language is a major theme of *The Memorandum* (1965), Havel’s most popular play, which won an Obie award in 1968 for the best foreign play.⁴²³ Rather than authentic identity being swallowed by meaningless clichés, as occurs in the *Garden Party*, the political manipulation of language in *The Memorandum* obscures the appearance of things and even hides their existence. Phyllis Carey writes that the “institutionalisation of language in closed systems” is what creates the absurd element of the play.⁴²⁴ For example, at the beginning of the play, Gross, the

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid 171.

⁴²⁴ Ibid 173.

manager of a bureaucratic institution, gives his secretary money to buy an incoming-mail book. The secretary completes the purchase. However the Department of Authentication refuses to authenticate the book because it was bought with non-institution funds, hence the secretary declares that the book does not exist. The premise of the play is that in order to maximise efficiency and move up the corporate ladder, Gross's deputy has invented a new and complex language which is incomprehensible to Gross. In spite of its incomprehensibility, the entire department is being trained in its usage. This language is later supplanted by another, equally complex, language to deal with the problems of the first, and Gross finds himself thrust into various roles as others take over his position. The theme of changing roles from *The Garden Party* is also present in *The Memorandum* in the way the audience witnesses the process of alienation that a manipulative language enacts when it becomes the yardstick by which to know how a thing appears to the subject.

That Havel is relying on the audience to supply affect to the play is evident in the play's conclusion. In *The Garden Party* Havel has Hugo deliver a didactic summation of the play's themes. In *The Memorandum*, by contrast, all of the characters find comfort in their life in lies, and march in a conga line off stage to a party at the play's conclusion. As Carey notes, "the play comically depicts the human collusion in its own enslavement to an impersonal mechanism."⁴²⁵ I like this reading as it points out that through the use of institutional language, individuals become "enslaved" to the system that requires that language. The characters on stage do not appear to have any real agency, affective response to their lack of agency is left for the audience. Carey claims that the play is a lens for the audience to notice this enslavement.⁴²⁶ Havel is not telling the audience how to interpret the play. He is also, importantly, not fusing the words of the play with a

⁴²⁵ Ibid 175.

⁴²⁶ Ibid 175.

specific meaning - at times the characters' communication with each other resembles gibberish. Instead, the audience recognises the fluid nature of words and longs for something that makes sense – perhaps a historically grounded language that is more meaningful. Through the hyperbolic treatment of language in the play, the audience comes to desire a solid ground of meaning. That the play's life mirrors the audience's own life, engenders a desire in them for a grounding in their life. The mirror is quite clearly the absurd language of the play and the longing of the audience does not necessarily acquire a target in the content of the play. However the audience, if they are to find comfort, will not do so in the absurd and meaningless conversations of ideological life and must search for a more authentic dialogue of self-critique.

The increased Difficulty of Concentration

Another play is worth noting for its demonstration of the theme of this chapter. A concern with a loss of identity through discourse also has a major thematic presence in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, as there is in all of Havel's plays. This play has been treated in chapter 2 already. There is a unique example in this play, though, which does not appear in other plays. A small section from the play, featuring Huml dictating to his secretary Blanka, will suffice for analysis:

Huml: ... –and thus attach to various things various values – full stop.

Therefore, it would be mistaken to set up a fixed scale of values, valid for all people in all circumstances and at all times – full stop. This does not mean, however, that in all of history there exist no values common to the whole of mankind – full stop. If those values did exist, mankind would not form a unified whole – full stop... At the same time , an individual scale of values is always somehow related to other – more general – scales of values – for

instance, to those belonging to a given period – which form a sort of framework, or background, to the individual scales – full stop. Would you mind reading me the last sentence?

Blanka: (reads) ‘At the same time , an individual scale of values is always somehow related to other – more general – scales of values – for instance, to those belonging to a given period – which form a sort of framework, or background, to the individual scales – full stop. Would you mind reading me the last sentence?’

Huml: That’s pretty good. Let’s go on...⁴²⁷

The play is discussed by both Sire and Pontusso; however neither of them discuss the quoted section above.⁴²⁸ To me, Huml’s thoughts in this passage seem to match Havel’s. The perspective on individual and shared values is not an absurd statement as it would be in *Memorandum*, neither is it cliché as it would be in *The Garden Party*. However there is still something unsettling about the exchange. The sentiment of the dictation becomes absurd when Huml asks for it to be read back to him. That is, the absurdity lies in his attempt to fix the meaning of happiness in textual semantic chains. This is significant because a key point I am making about Havel’s views on language is that language is a tool of critique rather than a way of fixing meaning. Hence despite Havel’s seemingly wise words, the attempt to dictate them and thereby make the meaning static, actually takes meaning away from the words. There is a strong potential for Huml’s dictation to become cliché. Havel seems to be making fun of the process of explicating the structure of values philosophically, and throwing in a use/mention joke for good measure.

427 Václav Havel, “The Increased Difficulty of Concentration” trans. Vera Blackwell, in *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 140.

428 Sire *Václav Havel*, 35, Pontusso *Václav Havel*, 96.

Language and Discourse in 'Letters to Olga' & 'Open Letters'

In *Letters to Olga*, the criticism of language in post-totalitarian society is more fully worked out. Havel writes to his wife about his reading of Saul Bellow's *Herzog*.⁴²⁹ This novel is apt for considering Havel's philosophical meditations on language as the titular character is addicted to ideas, so much so that he loses his grip on nature. Yet Bellow's novel, unlike Havel's plays discussed above, and in line with the more mature thought of Havel's philosophical writings, signals that redemption can be obtained through reconnecting with the world. For Havel, *Herzog* represents a character who has an intellectual crisis in a world with no restrictions on intellect. That is, with complete freedom, his ideas lose all meaning as they have nothing to anchor them. Havel writes, "He clearly lacks what we do not, which is to say a situation where words have so much weight that you must pay quite dearly for them."⁴³⁰ I am surprised that such a blatant criticism of post-totalitarian attitudes to free-speech made it past the censors of the time. The abuse of language by post-totalitarianism is a prevalent theme in much of Havel's writing and yet *Letter's to Olga* is suspiciously empty of reference to language. I deduce that this is probably because any discussion of language inherently calls into question the mendacity of the system that imprisoned Havel – hence the censors would be likely to remove it. Yet the discussion of *Herzog* made it past the censors. This allows Havel to tie the novel into his own thinking about the relationship between ideas and the world, or as Havel terms it in *Letters to Olga*, 'words' and 'deeds'.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ Havel *Letters to Olga*, 306

⁴³⁰ Ibid

⁴³¹ This relates directly to the discussion on thought and deeds relationship in Havel's thought, because in speaking, Havel is asking people to remember, there is always a relationship between the addresser and the addressee. So responsible speech is aimed at understanding, but more importantly, responsible speech is existentially honest; whereas ideological speech aims at maintaining the status quo. Speech for Havel could be said to be a kind of political action.

In Letter 123, Havel writes that experts on responsibility needn't be responsible because that isn't what they are paid for. They are, he implies, paid for describing the idea of responsibility; the deed is left up to the readers of the experts. The expert, who performs their role as expert, is lost in a world of ideas which have no anchor in reality. The need to re-anchor is a much richer aspect of his criticism of the possible abuse of language than we find in the plays. Havel writes,

Words that are not backed up by life lose their weight, which means that words can be silenced in two ways: either you ascribe such weight to them that no one dares utter them aloud, or you take away any weight they might have, and they turn into air. The final effect in each case is silence.⁴³²

Havel's words carry 'weight' partly because of the situation of their composition. Havel is not indulging in abstract speculation on the relationship between speech and action. Instead, Havel writes while imprisoned for attempting to re-anchor his words to his actions. This is more clearly explicated when Havel, without restrictions on composition, describes the nature of language in his acceptance speech on being awarded the Peace Prize of the German Bookseller's Association. The speech was published as *A Word About Words*. Havel opens the speech by referring to the full potential and proper role of language as the mediator of our sense of spirit, our self awareness, our ability to comprehend and make sense of the world, and to confront death. In essence, language is the source of all human action. In what I read as a veiled attack on religious doctrine, Havel writes that to consider the 'word' as the beginning is to miss the point that the word is only meaningful when it is related to the deed. Hence for Havel, in the beginning

⁴³² Ibid 306-307.

there was also action. Words for Havel have a wonderful ability to step outside of their specificity. That is, they are not simply historically rooted. Through language, history can be called into question, hence human action, when coupled with this questioning ability of language, is able to progress. Yet ideology attempts to stagnate language. It confuses language so that it is not rooted in any real action.⁴³³ Havel refers to Czech distrust of the word 'peace.' For Czechs, the word peace, under post-totalitarian conditions, translated into larger armies to 'keep the peace' by force. Hence Havel expresses a desire for authenticity in language. Under ideology, a word's meaning has its historical meaning removed. Havel asks us to consider the use of key words within the French Revolution.

I referred to the French Revolution and the splendid declaration that accompanied it. That declaration was signed by a gentleman who was later among the first to be executed in the name of that superbly humane text. Hundreds and possibly thousands followed him. *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite* – what wonderful words! And how terrifying their meaning can be. Freedom in the shirt unbuttoned before execution. Equality in the constant speed of the guillotine's fall on different necks. Fraternity in some dubious paradise ruled by a Supreme Being!⁴³⁴

Discourse has the ability to change history. It is through language that the mystery of the world is tamed. One relates, if religious, to God, through prayer. One relates to nature, in primitive societies, through incantations or spells. One describes the world in terms of scientific theories, and we organize ourselves around political theories. All of these ways

⁴³³ It is worthwhile considering Arendt on action when considering Havel's concern that language be attached to meaningful action. Havel is lamenting the loss of the public sphere which is supported by meaningful language employed by persons exerting their identity in a conflictual space so that their ideas give birth to a new and better physical and political space. Arendt, *Human Condition*

⁴³⁴ Havel *Open Letters* 384

of relating to the world are expressed linguistically. Havel continues with this theme to suggest that there is something latent within the writings on Jesus that contain the call to commit the horrors which have been justified under Christianity (e.g. the crusades). This is one of the major themes of Patočka's *Heretical Essays*. Words about the words of Jesus, presented in the Gospels, have structured behavior for two millennia. Living a life in truth involves being distrustful of the meaning of words as they come to us. Again the philosophy of negative Platonism strongly influences Havel's thought. In fact, he paraphrases Andre Glucksmann who had claimed that the role of the intellectual is to emulate Cassandra⁴³⁵ in being wary and watchful of the language of authority in order to forewarn society of any impending danger or inherent evil in the use of language.⁴³⁶ Foresight comes through a distrust of hegemonic language and by inquiring into how a phenomenon, for example peace, appears through a particular use of a word or phrase. If one has peace as a goal for life, and peace, under totalitarian conditions, translates to no peace, then the intellectual is to reveal the manipulation of the word. The practitioner of negative Platonism, in being distrustful of ideological language, thus employs language as a means of living in truth. That is, through a questioning of language and through a re-rooting of language to an authentic experience of the world, the individual authentically engages with the world.

Charter 77 and Meaningful Political Discourse

The link between language and life in truth can hardly be overstated. Language is the tool for inquiry, and it is the means of expression of truth. Language also reflects the pluralistic nature of life as no word contains a universal meaning. Hence, ideological

435 Havel the politician, in a speech at Stanford University (Sept 29 1994), again mentions the need for the intellectual to be like Cassandra. He writes, "The role of the intellectual is, among other things, to foresee, like Cassandra, various threats, horrors, and catastrophes" (Havel, Art, p.177).

436 Havel, *Open Letters*, 387

attempts to fix meaning do not reflect the nature of the world. This is shown in Hulm's attempt, in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* to fix the meaning of happiness in his dictation to his secretary and then leaping outside of the contents of that dictation to make a sexual pass at his young secretary. Havel writes,

The stifling pall of hollow words that has smothered us for so long has cultivated in us such a deep mistrust of the world of deceptive words that we are now better equipped than ever before to see the human world as it really is: a complex community of thousands and millions of unique, individual human beings in whom hundreds of wonderful qualities are matched by hundreds of faults and negative tendencies.⁴³⁷

The intellectual who queries the meaning of phrases or points out the emptiness of clichés enriches the public sphere by pointing to the pluralistic nature of the political sphere. It is not merely a linguistic task, but an ethical one for Havel. Rather than obtaining a historically grounded language that might be yearned for, in *A Word About Words*, Havel leaves the reader feeling that even historical meanings of words should be questioned. The point is not to reach back into a previous organisation of the world. Instead, seeking understanding through pluralistic meaning engenders communication which creates and sustains the political sphere. Havel shares with Habermas this communicative foundation for the political (I will elaborate more on Havel's link to Habermas's thought in a later chapter). Havel's involvement with the charter 77 movement is illustrative of his concern for language and inquiry, since it was a civil society movement aimed at encouraging critical examination of the rhetoric of the Czech

⁴³⁷ Havel *Open Letters*, 388.

government. It called them on their bluff by requesting the written commitments of the government to be backed up by deeds corresponding to those commitments.

Havel writes that Charter 77 is “a citizens’ initiative in which a wide variety of people have joined together to demand that the laws be observed, that basic human rights be respected.”⁴³⁸ Havel’s involvement with, and attitude towards, Charter 77 is discussed at length in later chapters. However, in this chapter I want to examine the concern with language in the charter and track the connection between its concern for language and Havel’s political philosophy. This exploration is necessary because Havel makes a mistake in claiming that the charter is essentially not a political document and that the chartist signatories are not involved in a political project because what they represent is pure plurality. Havel’s vision of a healthy polis involves the free clash of opinions under the banner of promoting the free clash of opinions. Hence fundamentally the charter is a political document. Because the political aspect comes through the agonistic clash of ideas, it requires an attitude to language which is the core of Havel’s thought. Ideological differences between some chartists will be discussed in a later chapter; however, it is worth noting that the specific meaning of charter 77 is fundamentally different between different chartists. In fact Havel contends that most charter signatories were not ideologically motivated, that is they did not believe any one particular system of politics would cure all of society’s ills. In his essay *Two Notes on Charter 77*, Havel writes that the lack of ideological belief in most of the signatories, combined with the extreme difference of ideological belief in some of the authors (e.g. socialist, catholic, democrat), makes the charter document a non-political document.

Havel writes that it is absurd to “speculate on the Charter’s political make-up or the direction the Charter might take on the basis of past political or political opinions of its

⁴³⁸ Havel *Open Letters*, 324.

spokesman.”⁴³⁹ Havel, though, draws the wrong conclusion from the non-ideological character of much support for the Charter. The non-ideological character of many Charter 77 signatories does not make the act of signing it a non-political one. Charter 77 was a political movement, broadly conceived, because signing the document was a political act, aimed at creating a political sphere of human action. As the Charter states,

Charter 77 is not an organization; it has no rules, permanent bodies or formal membership. It embraces everyone who agrees with its ideas and participates in its work. It does not form the basis for any oppositional political activity. Like many similar citizen initiatives in various countries, West and East, it seeks to promote the general public interest.

It does not aim, then, to set out its own platform of political or social reform or change, but within its own field of impact to conduct a constructive dialogue with the political and state authorities, particularly by drawing attention to individual cases where human and civil rights are violated, to document such grievances and suggest remedies, to make proposals of a more general character calculated to reinforce such rights and machinery for protecting them, to act as intermediary in situations of conflict which may lead to violation of rights and so forth.⁴⁴⁰

The document does not represent a political philosophy, Havel is correct in that claim; however, the charter is aimed at instigating a critical examination of the ruling ideology by asking it to honour its word or be revealed as a liar. Obviously the aim was to return to

⁴³⁹ Havel *Open Letters*, 324

⁴⁴⁰ “Charter 77 Declaration” in Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, ed. John Keane, (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 1985), 221.

meaningful political action through an articulate and active suspicion of the words of the Czechoslovakian government – and through creating a civic venture in which ideas could be shared between individuals with the only political motive being the continuance of the space for the sharing of ideas. Signing the charter was an act of living in truth. The only authority of the charter “is the authority of truth and the authority of the conscience that demands it speaks the truth.”⁴⁴¹ Hence involvement with the charter was an act of living as if the ruling ideology did not determine one’s identity. Havel is therefore incorrect to suggest the Charter was not a political movement. Havel’s politics are liberal, focusing on the individual’s responsibility to live responsibly. Havel’s liberalism will be addressed in a Chapter 6. Here, though, it could easily be argued that the Charter’s claim that it will focus on ensuring that individual rights are protected by state machinery is clearly a leaning towards a liberal political philosophy. Charter 77 was a political phenomenon precisely because it encouraged political action and engaged with political concerns. I have suggested that the Charter was a broadly liberal movement. However, it does not even need to offer, or even hold an ideological position, in order to be political or engage with the political.

The political element of the Charter lies in the space the Charter creates through the free involvement of many individuals communicating their desire for an open political discourse. It is not a revolutionary document and it is not a document to inspire specific action. For example, reading the Charter was not a call to protest in the streets. Instead the Charter was a space for individuals to express their desire for a political solution. As Slovakian dissident, Miroslav Kusy, in his essay *Chartism and ‘Real Socialism’* wrote,

⁴⁴¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 327.

The moral strength of the Charter... carries within it a fundamental political weakness. A moral programme cannot inspire the public to mass protests, to mass actions. It is a commitment taken by individuals upon themselves not to betray their own consciences and to remain faithful to their own principles in the face of opposition. It is an aspect of their personal philosophy. Therefore Chartism, as originally declared, is neither an organized political movement nor an organized mass movement, but no more than a free association of individuals, an exclusive community of personalities in which each person represents only himself or herself. Each person's faith is put to the test by the power of the state and its security organs, by the hardship of the dissident life in the real socialist cage, while the rest of society can only wish it luck.⁴⁴²

Kusy seems to agree with Havel about the non-political nature of the Charter. However, it is clear that Havel's political philosophy is central to the charter. The plurality of perspectives is central to the Charter's existence. As Kusy notes, the Chartists become political in their denial of political affiliation. The Chartists had to continually announce that the Charter was not socialist or was not democratic. The defence of the pluralist position becomes a statement of a political aim. Kusy wants the Charter to offer a recognisable ideological alternative to socialism, but we don't have to follow him with that assertion. Instead, by asking the ideology of late-socialism to define and stand by its written commitments, the Charter infused political language with a sense of meaning. It was not a closed off community or a self-sufficient polis or a mass movement. It was a phenomenon that forced engagement with the political, even if, as an outsider, that engagement is simply sympathy for the aims of the Chartists.

⁴⁴² Miroslav Kusy "Chartism and 'Real Socialism'" in Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, ed. John Keane, (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 1985), 173.

The essential message of the charter is that a governing body should uphold any treaties that it puts its signature too. This makes the charter a fight against the misuse of language. Patočka writes regarding participants in the Charter movement:

Their sole concern is to purify and reinforce the awareness that there is a higher authority, binding on individuals in virtue of their conscience, and on governments in virtue of their signature on important international treaties, placing them under an obligation not only when it suits them... but by their commitment, represented by their signature, to subordinate politics to justice, not vice versa.⁴⁴³

The point on which the charter movement is based is that of holding the authorities to their word. They are not protesting for liberal rights or a reformed Marxism, they are arguing for an honest use of words. Havel mentions the difficulty of writing a charter document because of the different political persuasions of its members; however the clear point of agreement is that the importance of political action being tied to a responsible use of language and a strong emphasis on the relationship between words and deeds.⁴⁴⁴ That the authorities would say one thing and do another is the kind of injustice upon which the charter is founded.

The central concern of critiquing language in post-totalitarian society that is prominent in Havel's plays is clearly a part of his involvement with Charter 77. The audience of *The Memorandum* or *The Garden Party* is encouraged to see its life as one lived within a lie; to the public that reflects on Charter 77, the same false identity is revealed. Even so,

⁴⁴³ Jan Patočka "Two Charta 77 Texts" in Erazim Kohák, Jan Patočka; *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 342.

⁴⁴⁴ Havel *Open Letters*, 324

President Havel often remarked that when he is not careful with comments, political outrage ensues. He was at pains to ensure that the public is aware that media reports are not always right. This sounds obvious, but Havel goes to great lengths, by writing *Summer Meditations*, to give his version of events. Then, in *To the Castle and Back*, he offers the 'inside' view on political events that he was involved with. These works are not just a settling of scores or an attempt to define his own legacy, as political memoirs tend to be. These books, (especially *To the Castle and Back*) represent an attempt at real transparency of political processes. *To the Castle and Back* is a mixture of diary reflections, memos during Havel's presidency, and an interview in which he reflects upon decisions. Havel offers his version of events without being didactic. He does not claim that Czechs couldn't understand political office and hence are incapable of understanding the separations of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Instead the work is Havel's attempt to show his thought processes through and during his presidency whilst reflecting on his attitudes before his presidency in order to compare them to his actions as President. Readers are left to make up their mind through engagement with Havel's perspective. Its honesty reveals the role of President to be the role of a fallible and remarkably candid human being. To return to the theme of this chapter, Havel's post presidency works demonstrate a real commitment to a careful use of language to avoid the pitfalls of charismatic opinions, or the sustenance of ideology.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the theme of the political effect of discourse in Havel's writings. Throughout Havel's career, language and the way in which it can shape a political situation has been a major concern. From critiquing the manipulation of discourse by an ideology in his dissident essays to his satirical presentation of the manipulations of language by late socialist governments in his plays, Havel's criticisms

remained constant. However, by showing how language can be manipulated Havel also hints at the freedom of language to manipulate language to return to the actuality of a situation or phenomenon. Havel's plays are not just satires; they are also intended to instil in the audience the recognition of the power in their own use of language to shape a situation and create a political sphere.

Chapter 7: Václav Havel's Political Philosophy as a Liberal Philosophy.

Introduction

A central claim of this thesis is that the political philosophy of Václav Havel offers an interesting new way to understand liberalism. Offering a succinct definition of liberalism is difficult because even amongst liberals there is much disagreement about its definition.⁴⁴⁵ I agree with the basic definition of liberalism provided by Will Kymlicka, that is the organising of social institutions in order to promote individual liberty and equality.⁴⁴⁶

Making the claim that Havel is a liberal is contentious because commentators usually highlight Havel's own insistence that he has no political standpoint. It might also seem at odds with earlier chapters which have highlighted the tendency in Havel to promote a life in truth as a negative concept. That is, he promotes discovering what a life in truth isn't, rather than provides a concept giving recommendations for specific political action. There is no contradiction involved in making the claim I am making. In this chapter I will describe Havel's liberalism as what I term 'agonistic' since for Havel, the role of social institutions is not to prescribe behaviour but to protect the individual liberty and equality of all citizens by promoting a political discourse which best enables individuals to realise their own version of the good life.

This chapter will defend my claim that Havel is a liberal by comparing his thought to that of other key liberal thinkers John Rawls and John Stuart Mill. I will show how Havel is

445 See Alan Ryan "Liberalism" in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Goodin & Philip Pettit, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers; 1993), 291-293.

446 Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy; An Introduction*, 2nd Ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56.

more of a classic liberal who emphasises liberty than he is an equality liberal like Rawls, who emphasises distributing social goods equitably. This chapter will then develop an account of Havel's liberal position by exploring how the critique of technology and the concern with the ability of language to distort a political situation have informed his liberal standpoint.

Havel's Liberalism

Havel's involvement in what he saw as the unjust trial of the band *The Plastic People of the Universe* has hallmarks of a liberal philosophical standpoint. I want to analyse Havel's views on the band's trial and demonstrate Havel's leanings which are, I think, those of a classical liberal like John Stuart Mill.

Havel writes that the "climate" that led to the creation of Charter 77 developed around the trial of the underground band *The Plastic people of the Universe* (PPU).⁴⁴⁷ Their trial did not cause the charter, but the trial of these musicians for, as Havel saw it, playing a style of music which had existential meaning for them created a sense of solidarity between like-minded people who were fed up with the way in which the possibilities of life were being narrowly defined.

As Havel recalls in *Disturbing the Peace*, notification of the trial reached him while he was not in Prague and he immediately returned to the capital as he felt that it was up to him to organise a public response to the arrest of the band. At first Havel was not taken by their sound at all. Havel had thought the band to be the kind of experimental band for whom the point is to be outlandish at the sacrifice of listenability. Upon hearing recordings given to him by the band's front man Ivan Jirous, Havel notes that he had been completely mistaken. Where he had seen only long hair and an excessive use of offensive words, Havel, upon listening to the recordings, heard "a disturbing magic in the

⁴⁴⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 154

music, and a kind of inner warning.”⁴⁴⁸ For Havel, there was existential value in the music of the PPU. Havel sensed in their music an authentic expression - that is, the band members were making music that expressed their own, freely chosen version of good taste and art, and this is what attracted Havel to their music. What Havel appreciates in PPU’s music is that the music was free of ideological coercion. In *Disturbing the Peace* Havel writes about his encounter with the music, “Here was something serious and genuine, an internally free articulation of an existential experience that everyone who had not become completely obtuse must understand.”⁴⁴⁹ I am interested in Havel’s use of the term ‘obtuse’ here. It shows a great concern for liberty as a condition of humanity. An obtuse person is someone who is slow to understand and in the sentence that Havel employs the word it is conditioned by the word ‘become’. For Havel, the totalitarian mechanism seemingly in control of the institutions of society, had been coercing citizens and slowly manipulating thought and behaviour so that the ability to hear something in the unofficial forms of art had been confounded. In other words, people who are complicit in the machinations of an ideology, people living a lie, are unable to see art in unofficial sources.⁴⁵⁰ What Havel likes about the PPU’s form of expression is that it reaches beyond this coercion. Hence the trial is not about two views of what constitutes ‘proper’ music, instead it is about the liberty of citizens to give expression to their existential experiences.

The focus on liberty that is central to Havel’s concern with the trial of the PPU is strong evidence of the liberal character of Havel’s political philosophy. I argue that this concern for liberty is central to all of Havel’s political writings. In short, Havel argues that social institutions should encourage individuals to give self-expression publicly to their own

⁴⁴⁸ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 126.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid

⁴⁵⁰ This is a major theme of ‘The Garden Party.’

existential experiences. Havel lambasts social institutions which restrict this expression. The phenomenological analysis of the life world, which is the key to a life in truth, requires this respect for liberty. An exploration of similarities I have found in Havel's writings with John Stuart Mill's thoughts on liberty will make the liberal in Havel much clearer. The comparison with Mill has never before been made to the best of my knowledge, and Havel himself never mentions reading Mill. However, drawing out exactly what Havel's liberalism is like is an easier task if we consider it alongside the liberalism of Mill because of the similarities and differences between them which show Havel's consistency of thought.

John Stuart Mill's essay is concerned with what he identifies as a tendency in society to impose its values on individuals. He criticises institutions that prohibit individuals from giving self-expression to their ideas and opinions.⁴⁵¹ An example of this tendency that he gives is of people with views considered heretical not being allowed to express their interpretations of theology. This tendency is of concern for Mill because ages, civilizations and cultures have a track record of fallibility.⁴⁵² Truth is not accessible to people in its fullness according to Mill and different ages give different expressions of truth, with each historical expression of truth containing some part of correctness and some part of error. Mill writes that "in the revolution of opinions one part of the truth sets while the other rises."⁴⁵³ Hence it is vital to understand that opinions contra the norm might be expressing truth and hence it is vital that they be considered in public. Mill argues that "complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinions is the very

451 John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty" in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 17.

452 Ibid 22.

453 Ibid 52.

condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action.”⁴⁵⁴ The similarity to Havel’s conception of good politics is clear.

In the previous chapter I quoted Kenneth Zagacki, who argued that the strong sense of humility which he reads as central to Havel’s politics is a reminder that one can never be certain that our position is right.⁴⁵⁵ Indeed, a life in truth is not so much a matter of living a certain way, but of continually justifying one’s actions by exposing them to Socratic scrutiny. Mills’ insistence that no society is free unless it respects the freedom of each individual to pursue their own good in their own way is Havel’s claim as well. Havel also shares Mills’ concern that restricting which opinions can be held only forces those who hold opinions contrary to the accepted norm to hold those opinions privately. This is to the detriment of society which loses its credibility and hence its assurance that it is promoting the right values and opinions.⁴⁵⁶ The main difference I see between Mill and Havel is that for Havel the fundamental principle that society should encourage is the free expression of authenticity, whereas for Mill the foundation is the sovereignty of the individual defined by the harm principle. The harm principle is that interference with an individual’s liberty is only justified if their actions cause harm to others.⁴⁵⁷

Havel does not share Mill’s faith in the harm principle; instead Havel’s anti-paternalism is directed at the things that matter most. What matters most is avoiding restrictions on a person’s capacity to live authentically and independently. The harm principle has been criticised effectively by Arthur Ripstein who argues that a better

454 Ibid 24.

455 Zagacki “Havel and Folly” 132.

456 In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel claims that totalitarian society has no interest in making its citizens believe their actions to be authentic; as long as they behave in a manner consistent with the ideologies precepts, that is enough. Hence the public space does not benefit from a contest of opinions as opinions are relegated to the private sphere.

457 Mill, “On Liberty,” 14.

foundation for restricting state intervention is what he calls the sovereignty principle.⁴⁵⁸

Ripstein's argument is that the harm principle does not fit with Mill's pronouncement that persons are sovereign over themselves, their body, and their mind. Ripstein's sovereignty principle is that "the only legitimate restrictions in conduct are those that secure the mutual independence of free persons from each other."⁴⁵⁹ The sovereignty principle respects that harm is difficult to define and that wrong-doing and harm are not equivalent. I am attracted to Ripstein's sovereignty principle because I think that it is a better statement of liberalism than Mill's harm principle, but this still doesn't quite fit Havel's position.⁴⁶⁰ Both the harm and sovereignty principle, for Havel, would be excessively anti-paternalistic. I will illustrate this with an example.

For Mill, society should not impose restrictions on individuals which restrict their sovereignty unless they would harm others. Henry Magid points out that for Mill, the individual who is in full possession of themselves should lose that sovereignty only if their actions would harm others.⁴⁶¹ This would mean that a law requiring citizens to wear seatbelts would be unjustified as the law is removing an individual's sovereignty despite the fact that not wearing a seatbelt can only be harmful to oneself. I think it can be safely argued that a law requiring seatbelts to be worn is not really restrictive, nor do the majority of citizens feel violated while putting their seatbelt on every time they enter a vehicle. Yet it represents an example in which governmental concern for the well-being of its citizens must take a back seat to the preservation of the sovereignty of the individual. Mill sticks to his dictum that society can only interfere with an individual's sovereignty when that person harms others. Ripstein would argue that the seat belt law restricts an

458 Arthur Ripstein, "Beyond the Harm Principle" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 34, no.3, (2006), 215-245.

459 Ripstein "Beyond the Harm Principle," 229.

460 Ibid 245

461 Henry Magid "John Stuart Mill, in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed, ed. Leo Strauss & Joseph Cropsey, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 798.

individual's sovereignty. The same hardline stance is not required by Havel's version of liberalism. Liberty is an essential feature of his thought, not to promote individual sovereignty, but to give citizens the ability to express themselves authentically and to endorse their views on what is authentic in a public forum. Hence for Havel, a law concerning seatbelts is not a curbing of essential freedoms as it in no way affects a person's ability to be authentic. This brings up an essential difference between the sovereignty liberalism of Ripstein and what I'll here call the authenticity liberalism of Havel. For Ripstein the self is created through the exercise of sovereignty whereas for Havel, the self is created through meaningful self-agonism, or self-inquiry into the self. Hence for Havel, seat belt laws are not necessarily anti-liberal.

Never the less, the similarity between Mill's liberalism and Havel's thought is undeniable. The focus on authenticity rather than sovereignty does not involve an anti-liberal tendency. Returning to the earlier discussion of the trial of the PPU, I want to give one further piece of evidence of a general similarity in thought between Havel and Mill. In *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel writes that it was important for him to get involved in, not because of the specifics of the case, but because symbolically the case was also a trial of the state's right to dictate social norms.

This case had nothing whatsoever to do with a struggle between two competing political cliques. It was something far worse: an attack by the totalitarian system on life itself, on the very essence of human freedom and integrity. The objects of this attack were not veterans of old political battles; they had no political past, or even any well-defined political positions. They were simply young people who wanted to live in their own way, to make music they liked, to sing what they wanted to sing, to live in harmony with themselves, and to express themselves in a truthful way.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶² Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 128.

For Havel the danger of the trial was that it could set a precedent that the state could incarcerate anyone for individual expression. Havel involves himself in the trial as the protector of individual self-expression because it is only through a plurality of self-expressions that something akin to authenticity can be expressed. Both Mill and Havel argue that society is richer when individual self-expression is encouraged. For Mill this richness comes from progress through a continual advancement towards the good that comes with a deliberative rejection of those forms of self-expression which, upon being exposed to well-balanced critique in a public arena, are shown to be detrimental to the individual. For Havel the richness comes through the celebration of the inherent plurality of the human condition. It is as fitting for the PPU to express themselves through their music as it is for Havel to express himself through organising their defence or the greengrocer to refuse to put the placard in the window. The key here is that both Mill and Havel see liberty as the key object of social organisation that needs to be protected.

That tendency in Mill to promote sovereignty of the individual as a means by which society may progress, through the progress of individualism, has led some commentators to label Mill's utilitarianism a perfectionist politics. Aviezer Tucker makes the claim that Patočka and Havel are perfectionists, in the next section I will consider these arguments and explain how Havel's political philosophy is not a perfectionist political philosophy.⁴⁶³

Is Havel a Perfectionist?

It is worthwhile asking the question of whether or not Havel is a perfectionist as Tucker provides a compelling argument for Patočka's perfectionism. It has turned out so far that most of Havel's ideas have some origin in the philosophy and personal example of Patočka and so it would not be surprising if it turned out that the perfectionism of

⁴⁶³ Tucker, *Philosophy and politics of Czech Dissidence*, 13, 14, 19, 54 – 57, 121 & 248.

Patočka, if indeed he can be called a perfectionist, found its way into Havel's thought. It is my contention, however, that Havel is not a perfectionist. In my mind he is too concerned with plurality and a kind of neutrality of the state to be a perfectionist advocating a specific kind of the good.

Perfectionism is a general term for a political or moral theory that argues that the state should take sides in promoting a specific version of the good life. The perfectionist is, as F.H. Buckley describes, "a moralist who is prepared to ignore our deepest wishes when these are deemed unworthy. Instead he identifies the good ends which we should pursue and directs us to seek them whether we want them or not."⁴⁶⁴ Mill could be argued to be a perfectionist because he sees the role of Government as promoting a specific version of the good. That good is a levelling-up along a moral staircase from its current position. For Mill there is a hierarchy of goods, or in his terms higher and lower pleasures.⁴⁶⁵ Famously, Mill declared that it is better to be an unhappy Socrates than a satisfied pig.⁴⁶⁶ Mill could condone despotism for non-western communities if it helped the communities attain a higher moral ground in which case despotism is abandoned. This is his Victorian racism shining through. For Mill such communities would be incompetent and would require a despot to drag them to the experience of higher order pleasures. For Mill the best society is the one which respects the sovereignty of the individual because the most able minded in that society, exercising their individual opinions, will eventually create the highest value experiences for its citizens. Mill writes:

Individuality is the same thing with development, and...it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human

464

465 John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism" in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 139.

466 Ibid 140

beings...what more can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be? or what worse can be said of any obstruction to good, than that it prevents this?⁴⁶⁷

Steven Wall argues that this “is not just a theory about politics: it is a substantive, perfectionist, moral theory about the good. And, on this view, the right thing to do is to promote development or perfection, and only a regime securing extensive liberty for each person can accomplish this.”⁴⁶⁸ Hence a regime that refuses to interfere in citizens lives except to prevent harm, will bring about the good life through its enabling of its citizens’ to employ their individuality. In other words, laws that interfere with individuality, hinder the growth of our most important faculties. I have some problems however with calling Mill a perfectionist. It is a stretch to say that in promoting individuality the state is making a conscious choice about the good. Mill has, as already noted, expressed doubts about the State’s ability to know the good. Mill does hold that the higher pleasures are independent of an individual’s opinion, and are those judgements that fully informed individuals would prefer, but the state’s ability to interfere with sovereignty is only regulated by the harm principle. This ambiguity is an interesting platform from which to ask the question if Havel is a perfectionist.

To answer this question I will do three things. First, I will explore Tucker’s claim that Patočka’s philosophy is perfectionist and see what influence it has made on Havel’s thought. Second, I will explore Havel’s dissident thoughts on state sponsored versions of the good life. Third, I will explore Havel’s actions and speeches as President and see if

⁴⁶⁷ Mill “On Liberty” 71.

⁴⁶⁸ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, “Perfectionism in Moral and Political Philosophy,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=perfectionism-moral> (accessed June 10, 2011).

there is a perfectionist strand in his politics. It is necessary to explore Havel's thought in two parts because Havel could have had a different attitude to the state as dissident than as President.

Aviezer Tucker claims that Patočka, Havel and other Czech dissidents promote a perfectionist ethics.⁴⁶⁹ He argues that the dissidents involved in the creation of Charter 77 were communitarians arguing for the creation of a community with the aims of furthering perfectionist virtue; however this communitarian project required liberal politics in recognising universal human rights.⁴⁷⁰ I don't find this to be a convincing way of presenting the case. I think the communitarian claim is weak as it is not community that gives the sense of the good life, but rather the community that is enriched through individuals being authentic. I will return to this point later in this chapter. James Pontusso, in his book *Václav Havel; Civic Responsibility in the Postmodern Age*, argues that it is not liberal institutions in society which make a good society, the goodness of a society rests ultimately on the moral character of its citizens. Not that the good arises directly out of the community; instead, that civic action by individuals makes a good community. I will return to this point in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Havel the dissident is not a perfectionist. Havel's encounter with the Union of Czechoslovakian Writers, published as the essay 'On Evasive Thinking,' is clear evidence of this. I discussed the concern for using language responsibly in chapter four of this thesis, but it is also useful for this section, since the sentiment with which Havel lambasts the union is clearly that of a liberal thinker.

The main issue that Havel takes up with the union is its choice of projects to fund or endorse. The Union chooses which genres and styles are worth publishing, and these get allocated spots in the various sponsored literary magazines and journals. Also there is

⁴⁶⁹ Tucker, *Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 17.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid 14-15.

clearly help from the government in choosing the official literary style and consequently other genres, styles and authors are ignored and not given publishing opportunities. For Havel this is outrageous because they are making the assumption that they are in possession of knowledge about which literary styles can best encapsulate the human condition. Havel is adamant that all styles deserve equal funding as that kind of knowledge is humanly impossible. He reminds the union of his involvement with the magazine *Tvar*, which had its funding cut prior to the meeting. *Tvar*'s aim was to publish without ideological prejudice, which meant that articles were published in many styles and genres. This brought *Tvar* into conflict with the government. It was seen as a thorn in the government's side as many genres are hard to direct towards the party line. In order to keep the union functioning comfortably, Havel claims that the union ignored *Tvar* because of political pressure, which he claimed was a rejection of their duty to protect the art of writing, rather than to protect and value only one kind of it.⁴⁷¹

Havel writes:

I think the Union of Writers should have the qualities of a good dramaturge. It should never hand out directives on how to write, or impose any artistic program on literature. Precisely the contrary, it must help literature and authors to be true to themselves; help magazines to be what they want to be, which is the only way they will be good magazines... helping each writer to be himself to a maximum degree – unique, well defined, and clear on how to go about fulfilling his own program. The point is that if literature is to be genuine, it cannot be anything but concrete, unique, sovereign and consistent.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ See John Keane, *Vaclav Havel; A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 170-172.

⁴⁷² Havel, *Open Letters*, 19

These are the beliefs of a liberal anti-perfectionist. The perfectionist would be making claims about a certain type of writing which contains value and be pushing the union to support that. Havel remains neutral on what kind of literature best expresses the human condition and asks the institutions which allow publication to exhibit the same neutrality. This is an anti-perfectionist position devoid of a public ranking of modes of expression. All literary modes of expression are valid to the dissident Havel.

Havel the dissident also focuses on the individual's ability to consider their actions and make a community-independent decision about what kind of person they would like to be. This is a clear liberal standpoint. Tucker's claim that Havel mixes communitarianism and liberalism is weakened by this focus in Havel's dissent on the individual's ability to rethink their understanding of what a good life is. This liberal position is strengthened when we consider Will Kymlicka's contrasting of the communitarian view of practical reason as a quest of self-discovery with the liberal view of practical reason as judgement. Kymlicka claims that for a prominent kind of communitarianism, that of Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre, practical reason leads us to discover who we already are, making us reconcile to our position in history or within the community. For liberals, on the other hand, questioning our lives using practical reason helps us to discover who we wish to be.⁴⁷³ The greengrocer in Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, discussed in chapter 1, makes a judgement about his political views and acts to change the community in which he lives. His understanding of the good life, when placing the placard, is one coercively imposed upon him by the community. A choice not to place the sign would involve a very definite

⁴⁷³ Kymlicka, *Contemporary political Philosophy*, 225.

judgement about what kind of person he needs to be so that his actions can be in line with his understanding of what a good life is.

A liberal would argue that the greengrocer is free to act for a revised view of the good life where that revision has taken place in the individual rather than through community coercion. A communitarian might argue against the imposition of a communist ideology upon the greengrocer and from a communitarian standpoint argue that the problem is that the greengrocer is lamenting the loss of a society which has faith in itself. In that case the communitarian could accept the greengrocer's recognition that something is rotten in the state of Czechoslovakia. However this misidentifies Havel's concern about the greengrocer's predicament. To my reading, by refusing to place the sign Havel's greengrocer makes a decision involving his own sovereignty. His actions aim at the establishment of a civil society, but his actions are motivated by a liberal understanding of the self. I admit that I am opposing a perfectionist strand of communitarianism against liberalism.

The solidarity of the shaken, which Tucker takes to be the authentic community with a shared conception of the good as care for the soul, misses the point that the "shaken"⁴⁷⁴ are liberal dissidents who use an ahistorical understanding of man to hold justice up as a critic of the community.⁴⁷⁵ They are, "persecuted" and possibly ignored. They are not a community creating together a common form of the good life. The solidarity of the shaken is an organisation of individuals who have undergone a rational inquiry into their actions and their relationship to a good life, and from that analysis have realised that another kind of acting is necessary for that. The sheer difference of opinion that comprised the Chartists' views of what is right, is testament to this. To quote Ronald

⁴⁷⁴ Patočka's notion of the 'solidarity of the shaken' is discussed earlier in Chapter 6.

⁴⁷⁵ When I say ahistorical I do not mean that they are ignorant of history. Patočka is intimately concerned with humanity in its historical situation. Instead I am referring to the freedom from history that the shaken are able to manifest. An ahistorical condition recognises that transcendence is a part of any present moment hence history is only a force which reveals a part of appearance. Transcendence is possible from history.

Dworkin “In the end political theory can make no contribution to how we govern ourselves except by struggling against all the impulses that drag us back into our own culture, towards generality and some reflective basis for deciding which of our traditional distinctions and discriminations are genuine and which are spurious.”⁴⁷⁶ For Dworkin, there is implicit, in liberalism, this critique of history and culture. The liberal is not ignorant of community and values, but is free to assess their worth.

In the conclusion of Tucker’s book he argues that the dissidents of Czechoslovakia are the reason why there is a Czech culture today that has roots in its past. In other words they were a perfectionist kind of communitarian. They preserved Czech culture by bringing it ‘underground.’ They understood that it was worth preserving and had some intrinsic worth as a community in which the good life was possible and so, the existence of a Czech identity after socialism is due to them.⁴⁷⁷ I disagree. Within the community of dissidents, each made an independent analysis of what was valuable about Czech culture and preserved what each thought worth preserving. I have already mentioned the extreme difference among Chartists on what the aims of Charter 77 should be.⁴⁷⁸ The Charter’s document itself is the only shared understanding. The Charter was for socialism, Christianity, democracy, and just dissent in general depending on which dissident was asked about it, and the same applies to the preservation of Czech culture. Tucker writes:

Though many ordinary Czechs still regard the dissidents as eccentric fools who ruined for twenty years their chances of small improvements in their standard of living and the chances of their children to get an education, and

⁴⁷⁶ Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 219.

⁴⁷⁷ Tucker, *Philosophy and Politics of Cazeck Dissidence*, 248.

⁴⁷⁸ See Chapter six.

though many others like to believe that the dissident movement was just what was left of the losing wing of the Communist Party in 1968... once the younger generation attempts to reconstruct their national identity and history, they will at least have something to be proud of in their national and cultural history.⁴⁷⁹

On my reading, the community's shared version of the good life was to collaborate with the regime. The dissidents acted jointly but, on individual understandings that the community needed to be challenged. Their judgements were those of liberals, not those of communitarians struggling to understand their place in the community. The dissidents, not being of the state, are therefore not communitarians promoting a state version of the common good. Their dissent is in line with John Rawls' claim in *A Theory of Justice* that:

While justice as fairness allows that in a well-ordered society the values of excellence are recognised, the human perfections are to be pursued within the limits of the principle of free association. Persons join together to further their cultural and artistic interests in the same way that they form religious communities. They do not use the coercive apparatus of the state to win for themselves a greater liberty or larger distributive shares on the grounds that their activities are of more intrinsic value.⁴⁸⁰

I think Rawls description of free association guiding a valuation of judgements on the good life within a community applies to the actions of Czech dissidents, like Havel and

479 Ibid

480 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005), 328-329.

Patočka, who kept alive their version of the Czech identity during totalitarian occupation. Havel's own remarks in 'On Evasive Thinking' support my reading.

How else do Vladimír Holan⁴⁸¹ and Bohumil Hrabal⁴⁸² achieve what they do except by how consistently they are themselves, how directly they are obsessed by their methods, how indifferent they remain to the world of categories, intellectual evasions, the norms and interests of the time by which they will be measured?⁴⁸³

It still remains to ask the question about Havel the President. As President did Havel endorse a specific version of the good life? Did the state under Havel have perfectionist tendencies? It is my contention that Havel the president was not a perfectionist. A reading of his speeches while President supports this. On September the 29th 1994 Havel delivered a speech at Stanford University.⁴⁸⁴ It is riddled with a kind of mysticism symptomatic of his later writings, however there is still vital information showing his political views within.⁴⁸⁵ Essentially the speech argues for a democracy that respects the higher horizon of Being.⁴⁸⁶ Havel argues that a truly peaceful world order will not arise until democracies become a place "for quest of creation, for creative dialogue, for

481 A Czech poet and contemporary of Havel's who was nominated for the Nobel prize in 1960.

482 A Czech writer and contemporary of Havel's.

483 Havel, *Open Letters*, 19.

484 Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 173-182.

485 For example Havel begins the speech by referring to a psychotherapy book he had read recently which had claimed that the pre-natal experience contained global archetypes which were not culturally formed (Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 173-175). For Havel these archetypes are proof of a global order of humanity which politics should aim to realise. I call this a vague kind of mysticism because it is not an analysis which has Havel's earlier rigour. Gone is his obvious effort to explain his ideas. When Havel, in *Letters to Olga*, and other earlier works, wrote about a relationship to Being, there was a real sense of struggle in his words. Here he just seems to accept archetypes as a given without much attempt to critically reflect upon them and the claims made about them.

486 I am fitting the themes of the speech to the terminology employed by Havel in his earlier writings.

realizing the common will, and for exercising responsibility”.⁴⁸⁷ This might be construed as a perfectionist politics as Havel has a ‘perfect’ society in mind, or so it seems; but Havel goes on to say, “I do not possess any special formula to awaken the mind of man to his responsibility to the world and for the world.”⁴⁸⁸ He is not a perfectionist here, as he does not say that it is the state’s responsibility to bring people to the good life.

One of Havel’s points in the speech is that a new order will not come through the application of a new doctrine or ideology. Havel can be read as distrustful of communitarian politics as he claims that using common rituals or dogmas to promote a new world order would add to the already existing cultural elements that he distrusts.⁴⁸⁹ The important step for Havel is that individuals and communities engage in a critical “self-examination” that will lead to a life in truth.⁴⁹⁰ He speaks of the importance of the separation of powers, the universal right to vote, the authority of the rule of law, “freedom of expression, the inviolability of private ownership,” as important aspects of a society, but only as mechanisms for enabling dignity freedom and responsibility.⁴⁹¹ If a peaceful world order is to succeed, then it must be based in an authentic respect of the higher horizon of Being, here called the experience of transcendence, or the experience of that which unites all humanity. Havel is making a statement, common to many of his Presidential speeches, that the world requires multicultural coexistence which respects a common universal concept of a beings relationship to Being;⁴⁹² that the uniqueness and

487 Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 181.

488 Ibid.

489 Ibid 181-182

490 Ibid

491 Ibid 180

492 This is also a prominent theme in his address in New Dehli on February 8th 1994 upon receiving the Indira Gandhi prize (Havel, *Art of the Impossible*, 159). His address to the National Press Club in Canberra on March 29th 1995 also argues for a transformation into a truly multicultural civilization that allows “all to be themselves” (Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 195).

freedom of each human being is best protected by a democratic system;⁴⁹³ that no state should coerce this transformation from its citizens.⁴⁹⁴ Despite being something of a utopian dreamer himself, Havel is not committed to a particular project to bring about this pluralistic world civilization which respects each individual's way of living in truth. This shows him not to be a perfectionist. He argues that we should not allow utopians with a clear vision of a utopia to dictate our politics because their "siren song" will lead to destruction. Havel the politician is hence more like Mill, arguing for a humble admission that the good life is not something we can be cognisant of, yet is best achieved by allowing individuals the liberty to find it themselves. If there is a perfectionist strand in Havel it can only be in his implication that everyone who has the liberty to examine their life-world, should.

Havel's Brand of Liberalism

In claiming that Havel is a liberal it is necessary to explore the main currents of liberal theory and see where in the field of liberalism Havel fits in. Havel is not an egalitarian thinker, or to be precise, Havel is not concerned with distributing social goods in an equitable way, as are some liberals, like Rawls. For the sake of clarity, I take John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* to be the central work in the canon of contemporary liberalism. For Rawls, liberty is a social good to be distributed.⁴⁹⁵ Rawls organises his theory of justice around two principles. The first is that each person should have an "equal right to the

493 Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 128

494 This is one of the themes of his address to Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand on March 31st 1995 (Ibid 209).

495 Rawls *A Theory of Justice*, 62

most extensive set of basic liberties compatible with similar liberties for others.⁴⁹⁶ The second is that “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.”⁴⁹⁷ From this, Rawls develops a theory of justice as fairness. For justice to be a part of the state, the two principles of justice must be satisfied. Hence there is a fundamental egalitarian basis to Rawls’ theory. If society is a collective producing goods in the forms of social liberties and rights, then their distribution becomes a matter of fairness. This is different from Havel’s position according to which politics is a question not of fairly dealing out social goods, but of how individuals are responsible to a higher horizon of Being - though there is a concern for social conditions in Havel’s liberalism which I will label 'liberal agonism' in the next chapter. For Havel, as evidenced in his essay “On Evasive Thinking” in order for people to be meaningfully engaged in the task of discovering an authentic identity, there are basic social conditions that must be met. In “On Evasive Thinking,” Havel lambastes the state for allowing buildings to fall into such a state of disrepair that fragments fall and kill citizens.⁴⁹⁸ For Havel’s liberal agonism to succeed in encouraging citizens to be existentially honest with themselves, there are social conditions which must be met through economic engagement. My point is that for Havel, the point of economic engagement is not the fair distribution of social goods, but the distribution of social goods that focuses on the more important task of stimulating citizens to authentically engage with themselves.

In *Summer Meditations*, Havel’s first book published while President, Havel clearly marks out his task as President as one of creating the conditions for a democracy that is

496 Rawls revised his view, according to which the first principle is framed in terms of a fully adequate scheme of equal liberties. “Fully adequate” means adequate for the proper exercise of our moral powers (i.e. to reflect upon and choose a coherent conception of the good by which to live).

497 Ibid 60.

498 Havel *Open Letters*, 10-24

based on a moral foundation.⁴⁹⁹ The moral foundation is not one of fairness, but of authentic living, and enabling individuals to express their freedom publicly. It is my contention that Havel is proposing an agonistic liberal democracy. This is more evident in his later speeches which concern democracy. In a speech to the national press club in Australia, Havel writes that the future of democracy depends on grounding politics in the experience of every individual rather than in a system derived from a specific culture which excludes others outside it.⁵⁰⁰ The search for a moral basis on which to secure democracy, which involves individual liberty to allow for authentic existence, is clearly the position of a liberal politician, even though it does not share Rawls' egalitarian conception of justice.

This is the major difference between Havel's brand of liberalism and that of Rawls. The distribution of social goods is not a topic on which Havel writes very much at all. For Havel, society should be structured to allow an existential commitment to authenticity, whereas for Rawls, the basic institutions of society should be structured to allow a fair distribution of primary social goods as determined through a philosophical methodology. Havel's liberalism is not presented in this way. What I see as the value in liberal politics, in Havel's philosophy, is the opening up of lives to a contest of what is of value. This is not a contest over the possession of social goods, but a contest of ideas.

Sources of Havel's Liberalism

There have been two major themes that this thesis has explored thus far. The first is Havel's quasi Heideggerian concern for the way in which scientism has changed thinking into a *techne* which has taken humans away from their humanity. The second is Havel's

499 Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations*, trans. Paul Wilson, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 18.

500 Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 195.

concern for the detrimental effects on a political state when ideology manipulates language. I have been claiming that Havel's political philosophy is founded on a phenomenological investigation of the life world, aimed at pushing back the horizons of lived experience so as to direct life towards the highest horizon. Throughout, Havel claims that it is folly to assume that a constructed system of living can make otiose the call of a higher horizon. He has cautioned dissidents and politicians to respect the immensity of the natural world in which we are thrown, and to avoid the hubris of one who claims to have utopia within their reach. I have claimed that this position is that of a liberal and the political situation which Havel espouses is necessarily anti-perfectionist. It is focussed on liberty, so that individuals can examine their own life-world and through that examination live a life in truth. This section will explain how the critique of technology and the critique of language inform Havel's liberalism.

In 'Politics and Conscience' and *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel argues that post-totalitarianism is an expected product of a modernity in which mankind understands itself as a techno-scientific entity rather than as a pluralistic and mysterious moral agent. The experience of post-totalitarianism is, for Havel, also a mirror for western democracy.⁵⁰¹ Havel sees a crisis in modernity as affecting all of modernity, not just a part of modernity living under the conditions of late-socialism. As explained above, Havel thinks that liberal institutions alone are not enough to bring about a solution to a crisis in modernity resulting from a schism with traditional modes of being-in-the-world which encouraged political action and civil society. For Havel, action must return to living. In Chapter 1, I explained that for Havel, acting politically was an answer to the challenges of the crisis in modernity that he identified along with Heidegger. In Chapter 5, I described Patočka's concept of the 'solidarity of the shaken' as engaged intellectuals risking a

⁵⁰¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 209, 259.

comfortable life in order to point out ideological trends in society which are coercing inauthentic behaviour. In Chapter 3 I used Arendt's understanding of the world and action to frame Havel's and Patoka's thoughts on the same topics. That is, Arendt understands the world as the space where in which politics and action are created by throwing one's life and person into the public realm for critique and possible self-re-evaluation.⁵⁰² Tying together some threads of this thesis, a liberal self-critique, employed in a public realm, represents Havel's solution to the problems of a world which has reduced itself to techno-scientific calculations. The Socratic lightness with which one must be prepared to sacrifice oneself in public - that one must expose oneself to critique in public - requires a liberal society if the sacrifice is to not become, like Patočka's, physically harmful or fatal one. Only a society which encourages self-examination and holds a neutral position on conceptions of the good can fully benefit from the engagement of the 'shaken'.

I have also argued in Chapters 5 and 6 that manipulations of language through discourse, can have the effect of concealing the true nature of phenomena. A liberal faith in state neutrality that allows citizens to form their own conception of the good life through self-examination is a strong element in Havel's thought and supports his views on discourse. Havel believes that the state should not force citizens to behave in certain ways. From his observations of post-totalitarian manipulations of discourse, he has developed a belief in state neutrality and a belief in rights that allow a self-examination. This self-examination is essential if one is to determine how to commit to a project of authenticity. And there are other connected rights to consider - the right to participate in public life through good television, newspaper, internet and other media, and a right to a good education so that a life in truth can be better explored.

502 Arendt "The Language Remains" 20, 23.

The commitment to authenticity – to a life in truth as the best kind of life – is an important aspect of Havel's liberalism and the stumbling block which my claim of Havel as a liberal must overcome. There is an implicit emphasis in Havel's thought that engagement in the political is where the good life is. This is not, in my opinion to make Havel a perfectionist as the state is to remain neutral. Havel does, however, seem to put forward ideas which go against the liberal notion of having liberty not to engage in politics if one so feels. It is my contention that in a neutral liberal state, ideological coercions are less attractive than in non-liberal states as there is a greater degree of education to challenge one's version of the good. In a liberal society, we are less free to put on the ideological cardigan. There is less state-apparatus that employ fear that would place one in a position to make a choice between a comfortable bad faith and an uncomfortable authenticity. With the agonism of Havel's liberalism, that I will explain in the next chapter, corporate or cultural institutions which can also promote fear and coercion are better able to be rejected. Citizens are encouraged, in a neutral state, to deliberate on the conception of the right.

Pontusso explains that an error of communism, for Havel, was that it undermined people's moral sense by making ethics a communal rather than individual exercise.⁵⁰³ The consequence of this was to destroy the institutions and practices of a civil society which had held people together voluntarily for generations.⁵⁰⁴ In other words the resulting society was symptomatic of the anthropocentric techno-scientific ideology of modernity which destroyed the space of politics. A society which recovers the space of politics is therefore the solution to the crisis modernity finds itself in.

Pontusso also claims that the reason why, for Havel, ideology can be attractive to individuals is existential in nature. Pontusso writes that the political problem of ideology

⁵⁰³ Pontusso *Václav Havel*, 128.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid 129.

“arises because human beings are prompted by their apprehension of death to join social groups that give a sense of solidarity and completion.”⁵⁰⁵ The ‘shaken’, in Patočka’s thought, live in persecution precisely because their actions challenge the sense of existential security that people find in their groups. The state, in Havel’s view, has a responsibility to be pluralistic and neutral. I think that this concern of Havel’s lies with protecting difference promoting toleration at the same time, rather than fostering the conditions which make people feel that a particular ideology feel that it has exclusive knowledge of the good life.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Havel’s political philosophy can be understood as a liberal political philosophy. Essentially, I have offered a way to understand liberalism by building on the classical liberalism of Mill that emphasised liberty as the fundamental principle of a good society. I have explained how for Havel, a commitment to authenticity is what characterizes the good life, despite the inability of a person to answer once and for all the question of what authenticity would actually demand of us. I claimed that Havel’s liberalism is a political philosophy which encourages self-examination through the phenomenological method that Havel favours.

I outlined Havel’s liberalism using his involvement in Charter 77 and the trial of the PPU, and his speech at the Union of Czechoslovakian Writers, as evidence of a liberal standpoint in his dissident activities; I have also argued that his activities as President demonstrate him to be a liberal. A key aim of this chapter was to criticise Tucker’s claim that Havel is a perfectionist, and I did this by arguing that Havel’s call for state neutrality makes him an anti-perfectionist. I also showed how Tucker’s position on Havel’s combination of communitarian and liberal strands of political philosophy is untenable,

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid 139.

and that liberalism is the political philosophy with the strongest affinities to Havel's thought. In comparing Havel's liberalism to the equality liberalism of Rawls, I showed that although exhibiting a strong liberal position, Havel is not contributing arguments for an equitable distribution of social goods. This leads me to think that Havel is not an equality liberal like Rawls. Certainly Havel is not concerned with social goods, but the more important task of politics is to stimulate citizens to have an authentic engagement with themselves, and that does require a host of social conditions to be met.

Finally this chapter explored how the two common threads of this thesis -Havel's critique of technology and Havel's concern with language - inform his liberal position. The next chapter will be explicit about what exactly defines a liberal agonism, the particular version of liberalism I am claiming as Havel's. Also I will examine criticisms of liberalism made by the agonist Chantal Mouffe in the light of Havel's liberal position. I claim that a liberal agonism is immune to the criticisms made by Mouffe.

Chapter 8: Havel's Liberal Agonism

Introduction:

Václav Havel never formally set out a cohesive political philosophy; however, my thesis is presenting Havel's thought as constituting a peculiar kind of liberalism, which builds on the philosophy of Jan Patočka' and the critique of technology by Martin Heidegger – a liberalism that I have termed liberal agonism. In this chapter I want to spell out liberal agonism as a political philosophy and test it against what I see as the main strand of agonism, that put forward by Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe is a good counterpoint to this discussion because she is highly critical of liberalism, and the discourse ethics of Jurgen Habermas. I mention Habermas because my reading of Havel has him advocating a politics created through discourse, hence Habermas implicitly looms large over the discussion. I agree with many of the criticisms of Habermas made by Mouffe, and think that Havel would as well. However I see Havel as remaining faithful to the principles of individual liberty. Hence the kind of liberalism espoused by Havel is interesting; it focuses specifically on a critical re-evaluation of one's positions. Therefore the agonistic element is a self agonism, which makes a very different political agonism then that of Mouffe, which revels in an agonistic display of hegemonic ideological creations of identity. Making this distinction between Havel and Mouffe will be a key business of this chapter.

In my reading, Havel's position is something more than a standard liberal view on re-evaluation and deliberative process because at no point does he contend that a consensus can actually be reached. With attention directed to evaluation, rather than the results of evaluation and without abandoning a liberal position, I see Havel's liberalism as fundamentally agonistic. Living in truth is therefore a self agonism which requires a

liberal state with certain flourishing social institutions. Liberal agonism does not share the drive for consensus which is key to the deliberative democracy of Habermas, nor does it share Mouffe's concern with revealing the hegemonic struggles that create identity.

What is Liberal Agonism?

I am well aware that I am using Havel's thoughts here rather than simply relaying them. I do find a cohesive liberal argument throughout Havel's work that shows that I am using Havel's thoughts in a way that is true to his writing. Were Havel to have sat down and worked out a systematic expression of his political philosophy, I believe it would have looked like the liberal agonism I am going to spell out.

A key insight of Havel's political philosophy implicit in his writings is that agonism without self-interrogation is problematic. Hence the central locus of any agonism is the self. For Havel, the best kind of state for allowing and encouraging individual's to self-interrogate is a liberal state. Therefore liberal agonism is a state that allows, celebrates and encourages individual liberty to investigate what existential identities should be expressed and acted upon by individuals through a process of self-interrogation.

Havel has an interesting understanding of the self which I have pointed out in previous chapters. Building on Patočka's subjective phenomenology, Havel's self is revealed in the search for it. The self is not the transcendental subject of phenomenology, the self is the subjective self which exists as an always historical being, but also as a part of Being. Agonism is the process that reveals the self to the self, even if only partly or temporarily. In other words, the subject is known in the search for it - not as the result of a transcendental deduction, but in revealing it in its interactions in the world, through its actions in the public sphere. In other words, the self is process based. I want to consider

a passage from *To the Castle and Back* as a primer to a discussion of liberal agonism. It sets the tone of self-critique and existential honesty as necessary conditions for progress.

The beauty of language is that it can never capture precisely what it wants. Language is disconnected, hard, digital as it were, and for that reason, but not only for that reason, it can never completely capture something as connected as reality, experience or our souls. This opens the door to the magnificent battle for expression and self-expression that has accompanied man down through history. It is a battle without end, and thanks to it, everything that is human is continually being elucidated, each time somewhat differently. Moreover, it is in this battle that man in fact becomes himself. As an individual and as a species. He simply tries to capture the world and himself more and more exactly through words, images, or actions, and the more he succeeds, the more aware he is that he can never completely capture either the world or himself, nor any part of the world. But that drives him to keep trying, again and again and thus he continues to define himself more and more exactly. It's a Sisyphean fate.⁵⁰⁶

Havel's wariness of political manipulations of discourse can be contrasted to the hope in the above passage that through agonism, language can come closer to saying something true about the self and life. History, and the movement of history, is described here by Havel as being constituted by the individual's search for self-expression. It is the individual, searching for a voice to existential identity which gives the species its meaning.

⁵⁰⁶ Václav Havel, *To the Castle and Back*, trans. Paul Wilson, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2007), 347.

Likening history to a Sisyphean fate, Havel's liberalism is clearly focused on encouraging a rich political discourse. However this is not a discourse aimed at consensus, such as thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas promote; it is a discourse aimed at giving existential meaning to a particular moment. Hence in Havel's liberalism, state neutrality and the promotion of a civil society are not mechanisms of promoting a specific, well defined liberal individual. Liberty is valued not as a way of being free to act away from the state's coercions, but as an opportunity to give authentic expression to the species. To put this differently, a politics of liberty allows individuals to make a better state through their own battle for self-expression. In Havel's agonism the battle is with oneself, not the battle of vested positions. For Havel, agonism without self-interrogation is highly problematic. Individuals must justify their positions honestly to themselves if they are to express themselves authentically.

The non-ideological basis of Charter77, and the many varied positions of the members of the Civic Forum, are evidence of the kind of politics that Havel endorses. Havel's liberal agonism would be a democratic state. Democracy, having political parties that citizens can choose between allows those parties to push for meaningful ideas and thereby allow the public to identify with certain political goals, such as human rights.⁵⁰⁷ It is in giving a voice to views outside the norm that political discourse is enriched.⁵⁰⁸ Individuals who publically give expression to their existential identities create the impetus for opposition voices to form, which either hold the dominant political ideas to account or usurp them. This agonism is not like Jurgen Habermas' idea of rationally building a consensus through communicative action.⁵⁰⁹ Habermas argues for a model of

⁵⁰⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 33.

⁵⁰⁸ This is Havel's point in 'On the Theme of an Opposition', an article Havel published in response to the relaxing of censorship under Alexander Dubcek's leadership (Havel, *Open Letters*, 25-35).

⁵⁰⁹ See Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1996).

deliberative democracy based on this consensus building. In a deliberative democracy, an action or choice is legitimate only if all parties that could be affected by the ruling accept it or would accept it in an engagement in rational discourse. Instead, Havel's agonism does not have the rational goal of Habermas' critical theory. That is, Havel is not proposing a theory of communicative action where participants in a discourse persuade each other rationally of the best political decisions. This is an interesting comparison because where Habermas focuses on shared and transparent meaning, Havel is dubious about such discourse. Havel instead proposes an alternative political philosophy where individuals, in working out their existential projects, create a responsible authentic community; they are engaged together in the Sisyphean task of making life incrementally better without falling for the illusion that a utopia can be achieved. Hence Havel's liberal agonism should not be considered as analogous to a deliberative democracy.

Responsibility is what allows the voice of the other to be heard in politics, and it is in being responsible for the other that the individual works out their own existential project. What I mean is that in Havel's liberal agonism, the individual, in encountering another individual, impacts on that other and is therefore responsible in the memory of Being for that other.⁵¹⁰ That is through self-interrogation, individuals justify to themselves their actions towards others. Hence an existentially authentic expression of the self takes account of how one behaves towards, or is responsible for, the other.

Havel's liberal agonism would rely on a few social institutions to promote and allow for self-interrogation. A healthy and diverse arts culture and a healthy and diverse press would be of paramount importance; as would be a focus on education.⁵¹¹ I argue that these institutions would need to be strong in a liberal agonism, because the main aim of

⁵¹⁰ Havel *Letters to Olga* 266

⁵¹¹ See 'On Evasive' Thinking for Havel's thoughts on the importance of art in a healthy polis and for the importance of free press with journalistic integrity. Havel *Open Letters*, 10-24.

the state is to create the freedom for its citizens from ideological coercion. Free press inform citizens of the actual happenings in their place, and encourage critique of practices which engenders a spirit of problematizing the world. Art, as explained in Chapter 1, creates the space in which citizens encounter transcendence. That is, art can be either a space for personal reflection on one's actions, or art can be a vision of an idea for transcendence. Art, in a liberal agonist state, is not promoted on ideological grounds. That is, all art is equitably promoted, funded, and written about. The ability of the art to show something of the human condition, rather than the popularity of the ideal which it embodies is what should be considered as the art's strength. I have listed education as a key focus of liberal agonism because the point of liberal agonism is to encourage self-interrogation in order to hold social institutions to account. Self-interrogation is best served through education. I am not going to spell out a curriculum, but it is important to say that the state has a duty to supply a good education to all citizens. Havel does not write explicitly on education however I find a useful idea of education that fits the model of liberal agonism which I am explaining in the work of the Seventeenth Century Czech mystic and thinker on pedagogy J A Comenius.

Comenius' idea of *pansophia*, or *pan-education* is that education should be "for all" and "of all in all matters."⁵¹² Benjamin Kuras describes three elements to pan-education in his book *Restoring Comenius*. These elements fit well, I contend, with the liberal agonism of Havel. The first is "educating fully and to full humanity all people jointly and separately."⁵¹³ The second is Educating sensitively and training correctly all men in all matters. The third and final element, I take to be the most important. "In all ways, and not in order to show off and deceive but to seek the truth, so that no one can avoid

⁵¹² Benjamin Kuras, *Restoring Comenius*, (Prague: Ideal Publishing House, 2007) 117.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

discovering the purpose of their mission in the world.”⁵¹⁴ If we tweak the idea of a mission in the world, the third element to pan-education could be rephrased as that all education should aim at making people aware of their authentic identities. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to trace the influence of Comenius on Havel’s thought, such a project would be interesting but at least I have already demonstrated that Comenius’ ideas may be justly used alongside, and to illuminate Havel’s.

Citizens who act as authentic agents, who acknowledge their responsibility to each other, are in a better position in this liberal agonistic state to hold social institutions to account - to promote change and progress, even though the task might be Sisyphean. This state is less likely to exhibit ideological manipulations which would cause citizens to self-deceive, or live a lie, and hence this state is a better manifestation of responsibility.

The next section will further explore the comparison of Havel’s agonism to Habermas’ discourse ethics which aims at a rational consensus, and to Chantal Mouffe’s agonism.

Liberal Agonism Further Explored

I want to continue with the brief comparison of Havel’s liberal agonism to Jurgen Habermas critical theory in order to further reveal the uniqueness of Havel’s position. Havel’s position is spelled out very well by Martin Matušík in his work *Postnational Identity; Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard and Havel*.

I find it interesting that in nearly all scholarship on Havel’s political thought, there is hardly a mention of Matušík’s work. It stands as one of the first books on Havel’s political writings and is the most rigorous philosophically; so it is strangely absent in the world of scholarship when one considers its success in situating Havel amongst such

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

philosophical heavyweights as Habermas and Kierkegaard. I disagree with Matušík's emphasis on deliberative democracy. I remain an advocate of liberalism being the position which Havel propounds consistently. However Havel and Habermas both share the view that responsible discourse can enrich civic virtues in a time when ideology is encouraging a life in lie, (or as Habermas would say, a colonised life-world). As Matušík notes, Havel's perspective is existential, whereas Habermas defines communicative action in the terms of critical theory. Havel saw his task as politician and intellectual to "subject the West, and in fact modern civilization in general, to critical reflections in order to cancel out the decadent effects of modernity."⁵¹⁵ This is not deliberative democracy, but something different, what I am calling liberal agonism – charging the individual with becoming a moral and authentic agent in the political.

Matušík argues that Havel's philosophy is useful in reconciling the existentially empty discourse ethics of Jurgen Habermas and the politically empty existential honesty championed by Soren Kierkegaard. Matušík uses Kierkegaard to explain that there are two parts to the creation of a good society: existentially aware citizens and citizens who have an idea of exactly what social conditions should constitute a good society. Matušík writes "What good is storming the bourgeois "castle in Paris" if one does not have a clue as to how one is and wants to be?"⁵¹⁶ In order for a good society to exist, both a vision of the kind of processes necessary to facilitate the running of society and the allowance of existential inquiry are both necessary conditions. Matušík finds in Havel's responsibly endowed life-world both conditions for making the good society. I have been arguing that Havel's responsibility does not entail a shared vision of exactly how institutions should behave. Instead, responsibility is a means of judging the behaviour of institutions and people's actions within them. In other words, Havel argues for a problematizing of the

⁵¹⁵Havel *To the Castle and Back*, 36.

⁵¹⁶ Martin Matušík, *Postnational Identity*, 108.

present, rather than subjecting the present to a comparison with an ideal. However, that Matušík finds a union with the non-political politics of Havel and the critical theory of Habermas, and the existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard is an interesting point worthy of consideration. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to say much about critical theory and consequently I don't seek to further discuss the claims that Matušík makes about Habermas. Havel does not engage with critical theory himself, and liberal agonism is not deliberative democracy, as I have claimed above. The value, for this thesis, in Matušík's work is that it helps me further clarify why 'liberal agonism' is the best label to attach to Havel's work.

Matušík shares with Havel the view that the primary role of language is to express existential identity, rather than, as Habermas would have it, performing a function of carrying meaning to another through discourse in an ideal speech situation where other factors that limit the transferring of meaning are avoided.⁵¹⁷ The aim of Matušík's work is to show how a model of deliberative democracy can be drawn. I have already disagreed with this supposition as an interpretation of Havel, but I do want to spell out the points of convergence that Matušík and I share in our analysis of him. Matušík uses Havel to analyse the negative elements of nationalism.⁵¹⁸ Matušík analyses nationalism in Yugoslavia in the early nineteen-nineties, and finds there a process of identity formation based on hatred and intense nationalism. This is ideological and dangerous, hence the tragedy of the acts that were committed there during the writing of his book (1993), and then again in 1998-2001. By invoking Havel's critique of identity based on hatred (from his paper, 'Anatomy of a Reticence',) Matušík finds an analogous sentiment to Kierkegaard's theory of ruling without authority – whether this is done by

⁵¹⁷ Ibid 10.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid 224-225.

employing resistance to racial or gender apartheid or in resisting totalitarian regimes.⁵¹⁹ For Matušík, this is theory to apply to Yugoslavia's problems. That a rigorous existential inquiry of identity is required of an individual to be moral, is common to both Havel and Kierkegaard, and Matušík, theorising from a late lecture of Habermas and a conversation with Habermas about his reading of Kierkegaard, contends that the existential critique of the individual and the call for an existential revolution to realise an honest identity, combined with the post-national politics of Habermas' deliberative democracy, is the best way to instil post-national identity and improve deliberative democracy.

[Havel] argues for a necessary complement to the procedures of deliberative democracy: to resist either a nationalistic or political lie, participants in discourse need a high degree of self-critical distance.⁵²⁰

I agree that Havel's project requires individuals to achieve a self-critical distance from all actions; this is what a responsible action is - one that is self-critical so that its impact on others can be evaluated. Also, it is only through this self-critical distance that the evils that can come through group identity can be avoided. Havel later supported the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, (something he was much criticised for). I will discuss Havel's support for the bombings later in the chapter.

Matušík points out that a common theme of Havel's speeches is self-criticism.⁵²¹ He writes that Havel "argues that unless one stands guard against insincerity in one's own house – within individual and group formation – it is naïve to expect checks and

519 Matušík *Postnational Identity*, 249.

520 Ibid 250

521 Ibid 251

balances from democratic procedures alone.”⁵²² This is a point that fits in with my explanation of liberal agonism. For Havel, as Matušík notes, when one is self-deceived into living a lie, one loses sight of one’s real responsibility to the other. One loses a life in truth, which Matušík calls a “sincere openness”,⁵²³ as one loses sight of history and one’s place in the flow of history. The fixing of identity that comes with a group identity such as nationalism makes one unaware of the shifting nature of identity as Being unfolds, as Havel would say, or as history flows, as Matušík would say. A final point about Matušík’s work in helping me explain Havel’s liberal agonism is Matušík’s work emphasises seeing the world as a problem, or as shaken, and that only through the self-critique that such a realisation encourages is there hope for a moral politics. Havel’s

Liberal Agonism and Chantal Mouffe’s Agonism

Seeing the world as a problem (or as shaken, as Patočka, and Havel do), promotes a kind of agonistic politics where the political is determined through a clash of wills in a public space.⁵²⁴ Hence, in further exploring Václav Havel’s liberalism it would be worthwhile to consider the agonistic political philosophy contained in Chantal Mouffe’s radical democracy. It is my contention that whereas Mouffe sees the individualism of liberalism as problematic due her post-structuralist understanding of the constitutive and contingent nature of identity, Havel has a different perspective. Havel keeps the liberal focus on the individual, whilst promoting the agonism that Mouffe sees as fundamental to a healthy democracy.

Chantal Mouffe describes the importance of a politics that celebrates antagonistic struggle. This is because she is an anti-essentialist. She argues that all social norms are constructed through power relations. Hence an agonistic politics facilitates the process

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ I refer the reader back to Patočka’s understanding of *polemos* outlined in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

of norm creation and allows norms to be unfixed and fluid.⁵²⁵ She bases her political philosophy on an understanding that identity is composed of what Derrida called its 'constitutive outside'; this means that in every identity the acts of exclusion which govern the constitution of that identity are present as a possibility. Because all social norms contain their constitutive outside, all identities, for Mouffe, are constructed as difference.⁵²⁶ Hence the idea that any individual within a democracy or any type of social organisation can claim to constitute the totality of identity (for example claiming that my identity is a typically Australian identity), misses the fluid nature of identity as difference. For Mouffe, this means that a good political situation is one which, recognising the limits of each individual's claims to the solidity of their views, focuses instead on the possibilities of a vibrant politics through agonism. Hence for Mouffe, what she terms a radical democracy is the best kind of society.⁵²⁷ A radical democracy is a democracy which focuses on recognising difference rather than aiming at consensus. I have serious reservations about the effectiveness of Mouffe's agonism, and radical democracy. I would like to claim that Havel offers a more responsible version of agonistic politics in his liberal agonism. My key question about Mouffe's agonism is, where is the normative drive of agonism? Identity, in Havel, is what is brought out through agonism; for Mouffe, the value is on the agonism itself.

In her book, *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe defends a feminist philosophy that is non-essentialist.⁵²⁸ Arguing against feminists who claim that an essential female identity is a necessary condition of a feminist politics, Mouffe argues that essentialism is unable to articulate a politics which would give voice to oppressed social groups.⁵²⁹ For Mouffe,

⁵²⁵ Chantal Mouffe, *Radical Democracy*, (London: Verso, 2009) 1-16.

⁵²⁶ Ibid

⁵²⁷ Ibid 16.

⁵²⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, (New York: Verso, 2005), 74-90.

⁵²⁹ Ibid 75.

it is when the view of a human subject as a rational agent with coherent views and positions is rejected, and when the view that the human subject can appear to itself and hence know itself is also rejected, and only when these ideas are discarded, that it is possible to “theorize the multiplicity of the relations of subordination.”⁵³⁰ Mouffe is building on many of the currents in psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and deconstruction and she uses examples from each of these areas to demonstrate how her non-essentialist reading of identity is the right one.⁵³¹ Her project is of a radical democracy, where equality and liberty for all “identities” creates a condition of agonism. In this condition the hegemonic struggles that create those identities (and multiple identities that exist simultaneously), are exhibited and then overcome. For Mouffe this is the only politics which escapes the dangers of group identity formation which always is based on an act of exclusion. Hence, looking for the essential ‘woman’ sets up the conditions for ‘woman’ to be fundamentally opposed to man. This politics becomes a gendered issue. Mouffe sees identity in a very different way from Havel. According to Havel, fixing identity with some large ‘meta’ group such as ‘man’ or ‘Czech’ is problematic, as it is for Mouffe. For Havel, however, the search for identity is to reveal individual identity, rather than social identity. Havel’s existential and phenomenological background informs a view of identity which is very different from Mouffe’s. What they share is the view that agonism reveals the extent to which hegemonic forces have constructed the view of one’s identity. However, in Havel, this recognition is followed by a move towards the individual’s existentially authentic identity; this is an identity that Mouffe would reject. Equality and liberty, in liberal agonism, allow individuals to give expression to their own identity, so that they don’t get caught up in the detrimental and

⁵³⁰ Ibid 77.

⁵³¹ Ibid, 74, 75, 80, 81.

sometimes violent identity politics of group identity. This is the lesson of Havel's views on discourse outlined in Chapter 6, and it is these views which inform his liberal agonism.

Mouffe is highly critical of liberalism, whereas Havel, as I claim is a liberal; therefore it is necessary to explore Mouffe's criticism of liberalism in her agonism if one is to defend Havel from her criticisms. The argument that I want to develop, is that whereas Mouffe sees the shortcomings of liberal democracy as stemming from its failure to deal with the criticisms of democracy made by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt argues that that democracy is founded on an act of constituting the *demos* as an *us* and excluding those who are not in the *demos*. Havel's politics is concerned with a broadening of political horizons to make less clear the distinction between them and *us*.⁵³² Hence Havel, I contend, is able to hold on to his liberal position and promote a politics of agonism.

As Mouffe puts it, liberalism's faith in state neutrality is misplaced because by nature, identity is inessential and not neutral. She agrees with Schmitt that democracy is founded on a substantive conception of equality; that is, there is some more tangible concept of what it is that unites citizens and that citizens share in. This is opposed to liberalism's individualist promotion of a concept of general humanity which is applied to all people. Hence there is a paradox inherent in liberal democracy. On the one hand democracy works as a homogenizing force that unites citizens through a shared and substantive conception of identity. Then there is the individualism of liberalism, which is essentially incompatible with democracy because liberalism fails to distinguish just who exactly is 'in' the *demos* and who is 'outside' of the *demos*. The idea of basing democracy on a general notion of 'mankind' is doomed to instability and failure. Alternatively Schmitt predicted, it is doomed to shift inequalities and acts of exclusion to other spheres of

⁵³² Mouffe, *Radical Democracy*, 38. & Mouffe *The Return of the Political* 84.

human life such as economics.⁵³³ In other words, liberalism destroys the political if it tries to illuminate the constitutive acts of exclusion which go into identity formation. Mouffe does not follow Schmitt through to his rejection of democracy. Rather she sees the antagonistic process of exclusion as the possibility of a kind of renewal. A political process which encourages these acts of exclusion and does not fix them as a set of norms, encourages a continual agonism which adds a political richness to social identity.

I have deliberately used the word 'renewal' to describe the result of Mouffe's agonism, (although it is not a word that Mouffe herself uses,) in order to demonstrate the different view that Havel maintains. It fits into the Husserlian, Patočkean and Havelian schema as a part of living in truth and care for the soul – that the project of caring for one's soul or living in truth is a process of constant renewal. It is within this schema of living in truth that constitutes a key difference from Mouffe's position. Essentially for Havel identity is not thought of as difference. For Havel, agonism reveals the extent to which one's identity is formed by struggles with hegemony. That does not mean, however, that one's identity is totally formed by hegemonic relations, as it is in Mouffe. Havel remains a philosopher of authenticity; he believes whole heartedly in an authentic character which can be revealed through a life of resistance and self-critique. Abstract and general notions of human rights and individual sovereignty are extremely important to Havel and the risks of instability which Mouffe points out are not, to Havel, the obstacles which Mouffe finds them to be.

My argument is that the existential nature of a life in truth is an essentialist understanding of identity, and that consequently Havel's liberal agonism is a radical individualism, where the political is the place in which individuals discover their authentic natures. To phrase Havel Socratically, the continual questioning of the given does not

⁵³³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 28-29.

reveal that the thing in itself does not exist, or that is only a contingency formed from hegemony. Rather, the continual questioning of the given reveals the responsibility that the individual had for pointing out the extent to which the perception of the given is formed by hegemony. Consider the following from *Letters to Olga*:

Evidently there exists an experience in which the longing of separated Being for reemerging with the integrity of Being is satisfied, as it were, in the most mature and complete manner. That experience is typically and most profoundly human: it is the experience of meaning, and of meaningfulness. The need for meaning and the search for it... accompany the human "I" from its beginning right through to its end.⁵³⁴

For Havel, meaningfulness is an experience particular to the self. Meaning is essential in the self. This does not necessarily mean that meaning, once grasped becomes fixed and static in a person, remaining through all of a person's actions; rather, as explained in Chapter 4, there are moments in life of real meaning, of authentic good faith, which give the self an elated feeling of wonder, or, simply of being satisfied in a particular situation. Phenomenological investigations into one's actions in the life-world can bring that meaning to an I, and in fact Havel, in a very phenomenological move claims that these searches for meaning might constitute the I.⁵³⁵ In describing the I, or as Mouffe might say, identity, Havel writes that the I is

... something more than the vigorous effort of the mind to grasp Being by perceiving and throwing light on it; these intentions are, of course, present in

⁵³⁴ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 332.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

the “I,” but they do not explain it entirely: it transcends them – by virtue, for example, of how it contains them within itself, mutually increases their strength and consummates them: paradoxically, the “I” seeks fullness of participation, but an alert participation, one that already knows of itself; it seeks a totality of merging, but a totality – so to speak – that is fully aware of its own unrealizability.⁵³⁶

The questioning is not all of the I, the questioning that the I engages in as a part of an agonistic act is to reveal what the self apparently already knows - its participation in Being. What the I seeks is responsibility, or an awareness of its participation in the world. Again, Havel points out that the totality that the I is looking for might perhaps be unattainable.

In liberal agonism there is emphasis on individual responsibility which is not to be found in Mouffe’s political philosophy. It seems to me that Mouffe’s central concern is that minorities have a voice in the antagonisms of politics. I agree with her that this is important, but having a voice does not necessarily translate to having a responsible voice. For Havel, being responsible for the world involves a self’s understanding of their role and complicity in making the world situation.⁵³⁷ So in the next section we must analyse Havel’s concept of responsibility. It will emerge that a liberal conception of the self is required in order to understand Havel’s sense of responsibility.

Havel’s Responsibility and the Liberal Conception of the Self

An interesting theoretical perspective on Havel’s idea of responsibility can be found by using Patočka’s project of asubjective phenomenology. This has left some traces in

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ This is a pertinent theme mapped out by Havel in his description of an intellectual in his speech at Wellington, New Zealand, in 1995. (Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, 208-209).

Havel's thought which I want to explore. The argument that I will spell out in this section is that a close reading of Jan Patočka's asubjective phenomenology, can help explain why Havel's political philosophy of living responsibly in truth is necessarily liberal.

Ivan Chvatik argued that Patočka's phenomenological project is, against Husserl's, an asubjective phenomenology.⁵³⁸ It is my contention that the understanding of consciousness in Patočka's phenomenology can shed light on Havel's own conception of identity and consciousness. This further supports a critique of Chantal Mouffe's position of anti-essential identity elaborated in the above section. Patočka's position, as explained by Chvatik, is similar to Plato's thought in the *Theaetetus*. Chvatik writes,

So we can say that Protagoras' thesis is valid in its original form. By his soul, man is indeed the measure of all things; he "decides" by an act of his soul whether things exist or not. His decisions are, of course, not arbitrary. This is where dialectic – the Socratic art of discussion – comes into play. In this discussion, we reflect upon the past and present in relation to the future (186A), distinguishing cause and effect, etc.; we examine "in the process of reasoning" (186D) what comes to mind *by itself* along with other bodily sensations, and only "with difficulty and slowly, through many troubles, if at all" (186 C) do we succeed in eliminating contradiction (186 B) and acquiring the insight that all parts of our discourse are truly in agreement, fit and match one another. Only then can we call our discourse a definition and rightly believe that we possess knowledge.

I would say that Plato thematizes here, in his own way, the problem of appearance as such, and that the solution he proposes is similar to

538 Ivan Chvatik, "Jan Patočka's Project of an Asubjective Phenomenology" Paper presented to the workshop Responsibility, Formal Knowledge and the Life-world, Murdoch University, November 28-29, 2011.

Patočka's: the accomplishments of the soul are invisible, since, when all is said and done, they take place in the very object they identify; despite this, their existence cannot be denied, just as Patočka grants the empty ego cogito an indubitable existence and joins in Heidegger's quest of what this existence amounts to.⁵³⁹

The soul remains invisible to experience in its search for the meaning of appearances. The soul is no contingent lived experience.⁵⁴⁰ The soul is caught in a double world: "the naturally given environment and in a world created for [us] by modern natural science".⁵⁴¹ As Havel claims in the section quoted above, the positioning between these two worlds is what gives the "I" its unique identity. Its ability to problematize the world reveals the extent to which contingency and hegemony contribute to appearance; but for Patočka and Havel, the I is still separate to this contingency and hegemony. There is still an I for the world to appear to and for whom a formalism can shape appearance. The I is something more than its reflections of lived experiences. It is historical, which Mouffe would grant, but it is also more than that. It is also free to "eliminate contradiction" through seeking a "merging" with the natural world which is the apriori "horizon of all horizons."⁵⁴² The I is that which problematizes appearance and aims at meaning, aware that meaning might not be realizable. But this does not mean that meaning is relative or does not exist.⁵⁴³ Also, as previously claimed, the I is revealed in the search for it.⁵⁴⁴ In other words we could say that the I is revealed in the movement towards itself.

⁵³⁹ Ibid 12-13.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid 7.

⁵⁴¹ Jan Patočka in Ucnik, "Patočka on techno Power," 9.

⁵⁴² Ibid 7

⁵⁴³ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 332.

From a Havelian perspective, a conception of the I as anti-essentialist, (such as that propounded by Mouffe,) is lacking in responsibility. It is alienated from the “I” in that Mouffe argues that the I is only an amalgam of lived experiences. Havel, in *Letters to Olga*, writes about a time when he was first imprisoned and had written a letter which was “very close” to what the authorities interrogating him wanted to hear. He feels somewhat guilty at having given in to the regime so he embarks on a search within his self to explain why he acted that way. For Havel it is a mistake to blame outside forces for the action. There is some internal, a priori I which is separate to the outside world and which uses the outside world of appearance as a means of forgetting guilt. In other words it uses the outside world of appearances as a means of living a lie. The real responsibility lies within Havel; he writes:

Today, the hidden motives behind this attempt are clear to me: accepting full responsibility for one’s own failure is extraordinarily difficult, from the point of view of the “interests of our existence-in-the-world,” and frequently it is virtually unbearable and impossible, and if one wants to live even slightly “normally” – i.e., exist in the world (guided by the so-called instinct for self preservation) – one is irresistibly driven to ease the situation by dividing the self, turning the matter into an unfortunate “misunderstanding”: those entirely warranted approaches cannot possibly be addressed to me, but to the other, who has been mistakenly identified with me. Obviously if one stuck complacently to this approach, it would lead to the disintegration of one’s own identity. For it is only by assuming full responsibility here for one’s own elsewhere, only by assuming full responsibility today for one’s own yesterday,

544 See Chapter 4. Previously I explained a subjective phenomenology to promote a view of human rights that establishes a right as the property of the subject whose existence is a questioning movement. Movement in the sense of continually reinterpreting the world and realizing the possibilities inherent in the world.

only by this unqualified assumption of responsibility by the “I” for itself and for everything it ever was and did, does the “I” achieve continuity and thus identity with the self.⁵⁴⁵

I think that Havel would argue that Mouffe’s agonism gives in to the irresistible drive to divide the self and identify the I with the outside forces that the I engages with. That is, I am not the person who makes a decision, but the sum total of the coercions which make the decision for me. The historical contingency of the self is not denied by Havel; he Havel is celebrating the I’s ability to take ownership for its actions. For this kind of responsibility an essential I is required. To identify with hegemony is to identify with a lie. The I is able to transcend power struggles, and through an agonistic engagement with itself, authentically to identify with its actions. Havel goes on to claim that to deny this ability of the I to be responsible for its actions is to “narrow and weaken the control of one’s “I” over one’s actions.”⁵⁴⁶ This can only be understood as a turning away from Being in which one would “disintegrate into fragmentary, isolated, self-enclosed events, interests and aims that lack any transcendence beyond one’s “existence-in-the-world””.⁵⁴⁷

Implicit in this recognition of, (and transcendence of,) contingency is an understanding of a general and universal human condition that requires liberty and state-neutrality to better enable a search for authenticity. Only living in truth renews a sense “of sovereignty over [one’s] own affairs, to a radically new insight into the mysterious gravity of my existence as an uncertain enterprise and to its transcendental meaning.”⁵⁴⁸ The free individual, situated in the world, is the normative basis for responsibility. Mouffe’s and

⁵⁴⁵ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 351.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid 355.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid 351.

Schmitt's criticism of liberalism, that the general conception of mankind is no basis for a solid unified state, still needs to be addressed. The free individual who, through existential inquiry aims at authenticity, is still, Havel recognises, situated in a political reality and through their actions form that political reality. Hence, it is necessary for me to defend this Havelian liberal conception of self from Mouffe's and Schmitt's criticism.

In the perspective of liberal agonism there are necessary social conditions which must be met to promote self-agonism. Both Havel's understanding of the self and his politics of self agonism, require liberal institutions. As Seyla Benhabib notes, "Agonistic visions of the political are often inattentive to the institutional preconditions which must be fulfilled for such politics to unfold."⁵⁴⁹ I agree with Benhabib. Mouffe has a tendency to argue for a complete transformation of politics to allow non-essentialist identity to be discovered through agonism. Havel's politics on the other hand, which aims to allow the conditions for self agonism. This necessitates a liberal political situation, and as citizens note their complicity in the institutions they engage with on a daily basis, they can realise their responsibility through a concrete understanding of their relation to (and their impact on) the other and the world.

Havel's Post-nationalism

The argument that I draw out in this section is that Schmitt is incorrect in his criticism of liberalism and democracy's failure to properly constitute a state, and that Mouffe is equally mistaken in her insistence that a state based on an abstract notion of a universal humanity suffers from an improper understanding of the contingent nature of identity. I want to agree with part of Matušík's analysis of Havel as a post-national thinker. Matušík makes an excellent point in his analysis of Havel when he writes that in

⁵⁴⁹ Seyla Benhabib *Situating the Self: Gender Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 104.

analysing some of the problems in politics today, “we need to invite the movements of resistance into our daily affairs.”⁵⁵⁰ Matušík also writes that only in acknowledging the groundlessness of all identity formation is there hope for politics.⁵⁵¹ I think this is too extreme. As already claimed in this thesis, Havel effectively defends a self that has an identity. Instead I think it would be better to say that only by incorporating into political discourse the voice of individuals who have achieved a self-critical distance, is the chance of a moral political state possible.

In the final section of *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel is asked about hope in the eighties. His response is a defence of actions of sacrifice, and a promotion of the value of individuality. Havel seems to be saying something similar, as a point made by Mill, that society is better when there are more eccentrics.⁵⁵² Havel’s point is that society is richer when individuals pursue their own worked out versions of the good life and find authentic expression through them. He is asked by the interviewer about problems of Czech identity and an antagonism between Czech and worldly ideals. Havel rejects outright that a unified Czech identity is a problem for him. He takes his Czechness for granted - almost as a given and not necessarily a political concern. Instead, he argues that politics involves larger matters such as how to deal with one’s life and sort out “human, existential, moral and civic” concerns.⁵⁵³ Summing up his position he claims, “I’m not saying [the Czech question] doesn’t exist. I would only recommend that we not treat it like a universal coartrack on which to hang all of life’s unpleasantness.”⁵⁵⁴

This is not a point that Schmitt would agree with. For Schmitt, and for Mouffe, a society based on abstract political equality shifts the inequalities to other spheres of life

⁵⁵⁰ Matušík *Postnationalism*, 258

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² Mill, “On Liberty,” 73.

⁵⁵³ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 178-179.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid 180.

such as economics. The current ideological dominance of neoliberalism, Mouffe argues, might be due to the factors Schmitt's identifies. Mouffe argues that Schmitt needs to be taken seriously; she is concerned that without grounding the subject in a pluralistic and decentred, or deconstructed demos, individuals,

would be left, at best, with their liberal rights of appealing to defend their individual rights when these have been violated. In all probability, such a cosmopolitan democracy, if it were ever to be realised, would be no more than an empty name disguising the actual disappearance of democratic forms of government and indicating the triumph of the liberal form of governmental rationality.⁵⁵⁵

Using Havel's perspective to respond to this, we might say that as long as that liberal form of governmental rationality was aware of avoiding Schmitt's predictions of economic (or some other kind of reductionism,) there is actually nothing wrong with this. Take Havel's response to the war in Yugoslavia as an example - something he was heavily criticised for. Havel urged NATO to bomb Serbia, and Serbian positions in Bosnia & Herzegovina.⁵⁵⁶ His decision was based more on a liberal cosmopolitan vision of politics than on any democratic conception. For Havel, that individuals were being massacred was independent of any Schmittian explanation of identity. There is only one way to understand that judgement. Havel proposed a transnational solution. He felt that every nation was bound by duty - was responsible for protecting the lives of those being massacred. Hence he proposed a military intervention that did not respect a Serbian

⁵⁵⁵ Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 42.

⁵⁵⁶ There are many such examples that I could have analysed. On the same grounds Havel argued that the US invasion of Iraq, on the basis of removing Saddam Hussein, was a good move based on humanitarian principles that transcended national sovereignty. Also in *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel argues that the west's support of Gaddafi betrays a lack of concern for humanitarian concerns (168).

position. For Havel it was irrational to defend the massacre of Croatsians. In his 1985 paper 'Anatomy of a Reticence', Havel writes, "the fundamental lesson of experience, that one must not tolerate violence in silence in the hope that it will simply run its course, retains its validity."⁵⁵⁷ National sovereignty comes second to a liberal conception of the self, and Havel argues that when liberal values are being oppressed or violently dealt with, there is a responsibility for other nations to get involved.⁵⁵⁸ He said of the bombing, "I believe that during the intervention of NATO in Kosovo there is an element nobody can question: the air attacks, the bombs, are not caused by a material interest. Their character is exclusively humanitarian: What is at stake here are the principles, human rights which have priority above state sovereignty. This makes it legitimate to attack the Yugoslav Federation, although without the United Nations mandate."⁵⁵⁹ Havel's understanding of identity is therefore a post-national understanding of identity.

Havel's thoughts on hope help shed light on his post nationalism.

The kind of hope I often think about... I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world... Hope is not a prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁷ Havel Open Letters

⁵⁵⁸ See also Havel's call for trans-national assistance for protesting monks in Bruma. Havel "Struggling Alone".

⁵⁵⁹ Václav Havel "Kosovo and the End of the Nation State" *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 1999. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1999/jun/10/kosovo-and-the-end-of-the-nation-state/?pagination=false> (accessed September 5, 2008)

⁵⁶⁰ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 181.

I think it would be safe to say that hope, for Havel, is the awareness of the possibility of renewal or transcendence. Havel goes on to say that it is hope that gives the inspiration to continually try new things. I am again reminded of Mill's sentiment that no human knowledge can ever grasp completely the good life; hence it is important for individuals to be encouraged to look for the good life themselves, because each individual knows their own good better than anyone else.⁵⁶¹ Havel consistently argues that ideologies are driven by what in *Disturbing the Peace* is called "self-momentum". No individuals are driving ideology. Instead, the sum total of people's actions supporting or complying with the ideology are what create the momentum of the ideology.⁵⁶² The momentum of ideology is only halted through individuals living in truth. Havel writes that in the eighties, he sees hope in action with many individuals acting out their own version of authentic expression, whether it be literary, musical, religious or through some other medium. For Havel, each of these expressions, although not always overtly dissident, has an effect of changing the world in which they live.⁵⁶³ Even if that change is not immediate, nor obviously effective, it is still perceptible. For Havel, this is because social norms are made from the bottom up rather than from high power structures issuing edicts. The actions of ordinary citizens, the non-political actions, make the political situation. Hence the position I read Havel as maintaining is that politics is a place for individuals to practice authenticity and realise hope. It ought not create a structure which coerces a certain kind of identification and a formalistic identity.

This is necessarily a post-national position because the kind of identifications which are made by the demos as collective, and which are not based on general conceptions

⁵⁶¹ See Mill, "On Liberty" 71.

⁵⁶² This is why, in *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel wrote that modern totalitarianism is post-totalitarianism. The person who is the figurehead of the state is, in a manner of speaking, not in control. In post-totalitarianism, the ideological machine is at the helm, the figure-head, is just that, a figure at the head.

⁵⁶³ Havel *Disturbing the Peace*, 181-186.

on the liberty and equality of individuals, are as problematic as they are exclusive. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in *The War has Taken Place*,) writes that freedom is not practiced alone, that freedom necessarily entails the freedom of others.⁵⁶⁴ In this essay he is making a point about Marxism as a solution to the post-war situation in Europe, but there are insights which are helpful for understanding Havel's position as I am elaborating it. There is a tendency in consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, to alienate other consciousnesses. Creeds like anti-Semitism when promoted in a demos, become a means of transforming other consciousnesses into less than human types. This can be used as a criticism of Schmitt's position. The demos, if given a nation to identify with, can view other nations as less than themselves, which is a harmful position. We have seen that although Havel does not want to do away with national borders and national identities, he still wants to see a great power shifted to trans-national institutions like NATO, the EU, and the UN, who have a military power to protect a liberal conception of the individual. Havel addresses Merleau-Ponty's concerns, and insists that the practice of one's freedom entails a responsibility for the freedom of others. A liberal agonistic state is a state which avoids the problems of poisonous group identities through the promotion of individual responsibility.

Conclusion

I have claimed that although never explicit about a systematic political philosophy, Havel still promotes certain ideas and values throughout his career and that through an examination of the continuous threads a political philosophy does reveal itself - what I have called a philosophy of liberal agonism. Hence, this chapter has attempted to sketch out an argument for liberal agonism. Havel's focus on the importance of individual responsibility that is entailed in his notion of non-political politics, I have argued, requires

⁵⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty "The War has Taken Place," 46.

a liberal state that respects and promotes the individual's self-expression of an existential identity and that encourages a self-critique of that identity. When expression and critique are combined, the conditions for responsible living are met. The good society is one which manifests responsibility. In order to make the position of liberal agonism clearer, I have compared my sketch of liberal agonism to Habermas' deliberative democracy, arguing that Havel's mistrust of discourse that is not expressed from an existentially authentic position, (spelled out in Chapter 6,) means that Havel does not share Habermas' concern with the communicative act and consensus building. The idea of a rational consensus that Habermas promotes might be an unrealistic goal. Havel's emphasis on existential honesty, in liberal agonism, is a different way to think about political discourse. I have also explored the agonism of Chantal Mouffe, arguing that Havel's conception of identity allows a vastly different politics than Mouffe's who argues the self is always constituted by hegemonic struggles. Finally, in this chapter I claimed that Havel's politics is best conceived as a post-national politics because, for him, responsibility to the other is not limited by one's national identity.

Conclusion

What I Have Argued

This thesis has rested on a denial of Havel's own claim that there is no coherence to his thought and that he offers no philosophical position. Indeed, I have denied Havel's own denial that he is even a philosopher. I find Havel to be an exponent of a remarkably responsible and moral political philosophy and so I have traced out just what that political philosophy is and what influences on Havel have helped shape that philosophy.

The first chapter of the thesis explored the influence of Heidegger on Havel. This is because a large body of scholarship treating Havel's thought lists him as the most important influence. The two book length studies by James Pontusso and James Sire both cite Havel as a Heideggerian thinker and a book length study and article by Aviezer Tucker looks at Heideggerian elements as well. I argued that Havel's philosophy can be considered as a meaningful move beyond Heidegger in addressing the problems of modernity that both Heidegger and Havel identify. Both thinkers are concerned with the technologisation of thought and the resulting loss of authenticity; however, I have argued that it is Havel who has formulated the more meaningful address to this predicament. In comparing Havel's and Heidegger's thoughts on the political significance of art I elaborated a philosophy of transcendence in Havel which is absent in Heidegger. Heidegger's thought aims at Being, and for Heidegger art aims at Being as well. For Havel, art has a political significance which opens the political up to transcendence. Hence art that highlights the detrimental nature of thinking as *techne* opens a space up in the thought of the consumer of art for a meaningful self-critique which creates the impetus for a shift from a life in a lie to a life in truth.

Another repeated accusation levelled at Havel is that he is a religious thinker and so my second chapter explored the presence of religion in Havel's work. Ultimately, I

rejected the claim that Havel can be called a religious thinker. He is close, on a number of occasions, to professing a belief in a deity; however it is equally plausible that Havel is using religion as a symbol, and this is the better interpretation. This is the interpretation I adopt as I think that a life in truth is not informed by religious conviction and is instead an existential idea. Havel uses religious phrases to talk about responsibility. He is trying to describe the responsibility that each person has to the other and to the world in that all actions that influence phenomena within the horizon of being. In that sense a life in truth is an existential concept rather than a religious one. The chapter concluded with an exploration of how Havel's political thought can be applied without the metaphysical ground that a religious interpretation of Havel would necessitate.

The third and fourth chapters built on the analysis of Havel's thought made by Edward Findlay in his paper 'Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique; Political philosophy in Václav Havel and Jan Patočka'. I have disagreed in the main with Findlay's thoughts on Havel. For Findlay, Havel's writings reflect the philosophy of Patočka and Czech dissidence in general without offering a cohesive line of argumentation.⁵⁶⁵ Findlay is right in that Havel does reflect a lot of the themes of Patočka's work and so my second and third chapter explored that influence.⁵⁶⁶ Unlike Findlay, however, my aim was to spell out how Havel appropriates the themes of Patočka's work while offering his own unique ideas at the same time. That is, I demonstrated how there is a unique Havel and not just a Patočkean Havel. The focus on concrete political matters in Havel's writings is a move past Patočka, whose rigorous adherence to considering problems in phenomenology is only brought into politics in the last essay of his *Heretical Essays* and in his involvement in Charter 77. Havel, on the other hand, uses the phenomenology of Patočka as a launch pad into the concrete world of the political, aiming at real change. With that in mind I

⁵⁶⁵ Findlay "classical Ethics," 404.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

explored similarities in Havel's writings to those of Hannah Arendt, whose concern with concrete political events is matched by Havel. Another important theme of my discussion of Havel appropriation of Patočka was the echoing of Patočka's engagement with the philosophy of Plato. I explored Patočka's interpretation of Plato's cave allegory to show how, for Havel, seeing the world as problematicity is an activity that is performed inside the cave, or in the world we are thrown into. This is a key idea for Havel as it shows how his politics works without having to supply a utopia. That is, the world can be revealed as a problem, and one can create transcendence without having a clear understanding about the goal of that transcendence. A key feature of Chapter 4 was an exploration and comparison of Patočka's idea of the community of the shaken and Havel's power of the powerless. Both Patočka and Havel celebrate the importance of the sacrifice made by dissidents. Patočka's shaken choose not to live rather than live without the good and Havel's powerless risk their comfort for the sake of the good. The concept has different names and in Havel it is more focused within a philosophy of dissidence; however, the influence is obvious.

The fifth chapter of this thesis explored in greater detail Havel's idea of living in truth. The essential point of the chapter was that this is a concept best conceived as an existential idea (building on the claims of Chapter 2). I entered Havel into a meaningful discourse with Sartre by comparing living a lie to Sartre's concept of Bad faith. The ultimate aim was to show the depth to Havel's analysis of self-deception in an ideology driven political situation. The Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* writes that bad faith is a way of dealing with anguish. I argued that Havel's analysis of self-deception is not grounded in an existential anguish at the ultimate meaninglessness of existence, but is instead grounded in real concrete political situations. Havel never loses sight of morality, and hence living a lie and living in truth are always moral attitudes of the self. I argued

that this is a meaningful address to Sartre's anguish as, for Havel, the experience of being is really one of elation.

I continued the theme of presenting Havel as an existential thinker by exploring a concern for meaningful discourse in his writing. For Havel, discourse expresses an existential identity and he is concerned about the way that identity is lost in a technologized world and in an ideological world that reduces utterances to clichés. In his plays, essays, speeches and letters throughout his career, Havel argues for a restoration of meaningful discourse. The loss of identity by the character Hugo Pludek, as he enters the world of work and adopts its language in *The Garden Party*, the loss of the moral dimension of the word 'peace' in 'A Word About Words', the description of the greengrocer's loss of integrity by placing the unwanted placard: all of these examples show a deep concern with ensuring that our actions and discourse match up with existentially authentic identities that we have worked out through rigorous self-interrogation.

The focus on the self as the locus of a moral state led me to explore a liberal inflection in Havel's works. In turn, that led me to the conclusion that Havel does in fact espouse a liberal political philosophy. Throughout his involvement in Charter 77, the Civic Forum, his presidency and his career in drama, Havel holds the view that the individual should be free from state or ideological coercion. For Havel, politics is not a question of fairly dealing out social goods, but of how individuals are responsible to a higher horizon of Being. Havel does echo many of the sentiments of classical liberals and my chapter explored them through the work of John Stuart Mill. Ultimately, Havel's difference from Mill is to be found in Mill's idea of the harm principle. Havel thinks that an individual should be free from the state only in so far as the state would encroach upon the individual's expression of their existential projects.

I argued that Havel's liberalism is a political philosophy aimed at rescuing modernity from the pitfalls of scientism and ideology. The aim of his political philosophy is the liberation of the self to perform a self-interrogation to more authentically manifest responsibility; hence I called Havel's liberalism, 'liberal agonism'.

Chapter 8 explored further the notion of a liberal agonism, claiming that its essential feature is an agonism with the self. I situated this as having a loose relationship to Patočka's project of a subjective phenomenology as, for Patočka, the self is not the subject of a transcendental reduction but rather, is revealed in the polemical search for the self. Similarly for Havel, self-interrogation reveals one's responsibility to the world and to the other. Hence, a politics which encourages self-agonism is the most preferable kind of politics. A liberal state which encourages and creates the conditions for a self-interrogation, can create citizens who would hold institutions to account because they are aware of their complicity in the actions of those institutions. A key feature of liberal agonism is that agonism within the state does not aim at rational consensus as it does in the model of deliberative democracy put forward by Jurgen Habermas. Instead, Havel likens the task of politics to Sisyphus, forever critiquing, never settling. This is in line with the Platonic element of Havel's thought outlined in Chapter 3. Finally the chapter outlined how Havel's liberal agonism is best understood as a contribution to post-national politics. For Havel the moral outweighs the national and existential identities are not tied to a specific national identity. A real understanding of history and a responsibility for history recognises the fluidity of nations and hence any attempt to fix national identity is creating an ideological shelter which forces a life in a lie.

The Significance of Liberal Agonism

I think that the outline for a liberal agonism that I spelled out in the last chapter of this thesis is a meaningful answer to some of the problems confronting the present moment politically. The entire aim of this thesis is to derive a coherent political philosophy out of Havel's many writings and apparent contradictions, and I did this by describing a liberal agonism. To conclude the thesis I want to suggest in what areas a philosophy of liberal agonism might be appropriate for further study in the contemporary political climate. Politics today is in a deeply troubled state, and it was my original reading of Havel that opened up to me the possibility of a theoretical rescue without having to argue for a complete transformation of the human subject. The ideology of neo-liberalism, which arguably is responsible for many of the economic predicaments that the world finds itself in, is also a world phenomenon that is undermining the political sphere. I think we would benefit from having Havel's thought included in the debate over the neoliberal ideology's role in politics. One of the main problems of the neoliberal ideology infecting politics is the increase in authoritarian legislation aimed at protecting liberties. The breakdown in meaningful communication especially surrounding the words 'freedom' and 'security' is ripe for Havel's contribution.⁵⁶⁷ I also think that current discussions about what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls the state of exception, and the rising loss of liberties in the western world in the name of protecting liberties, is of special cause for concern. Havel's liberal agonism could contribute something useful to the debate around this phenomenon. I will briefly elaborate on these two main areas in which Havel's liberal agonism would be well placed as a voice of dissent.

⁵⁶⁷ Mary Zournazi has written an illuminating little book *Keywords to War* in which she demonstrates her concern for the abuse on meaningful discourse perpetrated by politicians and the media in the war on terror. I mention this book because I think it is quite Havelian in scope. Zournazi's method is to point out how a particular word, such as freedom, is being abused and then to give an etymology of the word demonstrating its use in political and philosophical discourse over the course of western history.

See Mary Zournazi, *Keywords to War; Reviving Language in an Age of Terror*, (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007).

Schmitt argued that a society based on an abstract non-substantive type of equality would relegate inequalities to other spheres of human activity and hence relegate politics to those spheres. For the last few decades, up until the recent collapse of world markets in 2008, Schmitt's argument seems prophetic. Neo-liberalism - or the view that free economic markets are the best institutions for regulating free behaviour – is a deeply problematic political ideology, and Havel's liberal agonism is a great perspective from which to critique this view. Havel's liberal agonism criticises the reduction of human behaviour to economic analysis, and avoids the pitfalls of Schmitt's criticism of general concepts such as 'the good of man.' As Kymlicka points out, there are some thinkers who argue that the market can be a school in civic virtue.⁵⁶⁸ Lawrence Mead, for example, claims that the political ideal is a society in which everyone contributes; hence, unemployed individuals who chose not to work should have no entitlements to encourage participation and contribution.⁵⁶⁹ There is a clear reduction of politics to economics in Mead's analysis. The only social contribution an individual can make, in Mead's outlook, is an economic one.

Hence, it is my view that neoliberalism is an ideology rather than a philosophy. It does not describe truthfully the human condition, and prescribes a society which needs to be buttressed by sometimes oppressive social institutions. In his 1963 essay *The Great Ascent*, Robert Heilbroner talks about the necessity of economic development and the subsequent struggle that will ensue with the denationalising of developed nations. Heilbroner writes that "the price of development is apt to be political and economic authoritarianism."⁵⁷⁰ For Heilbroner, state intervention is not required to maintain levels

568 Kymlicka *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 304

569 Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlements; The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 219-220.

570 Robert Heilbroner, *The Great Ascent; The Struggle for Economic Development in Our Time*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 20.

of social morality; instead it is required to force economic progress on citizens who might be frustrated by a lack of progress and hence might require military intervention to keep them under control.⁵⁷¹ One of the hallmarks of neo-liberalism is its faith in the impropriety of governments to intervene in social affairs because their intervention in a market is a hindrance to productivity. This is a key argument of Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, which argues that Government intervention in an economy puts society on the path to becoming socialist and totalitarian; this is also a key argument in Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, which argues that a free market economy is necessarily politically free and democratic.⁵⁷² I think that Heilbroner's prediction that in fact (contra Friedman) the business of deregulating economies is likely to go hand in hand with increasing political authoritarianism and the development of regimes of social control is well worth considering. The ideology of neo-liberalism uses the rhetoric of freedom and the reduction of state intervention in economic matters to pave the way for a new form of political authoritarianism.

In describing the neo-liberal agenda, Henry Giroux writes:

neo-liberalism obviates issues of contingency, struggle and social agency by celebrating the inevitability of economic laws in which the ethical idea of intervening in the world gives way to the idea that we have no choice but to adapt both our hopes and our abilities to the new global market.⁵⁷³

⁵⁷¹ *ibid* 21.

⁵⁷² See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962). & Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1980)

⁵⁷³ Henry Giroux, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of Democracy: Resurrecting Hope in Dark Times" *Dissident Voice*, August 7, 2004. <http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Aug04/Giroux0807.htm> (Accessed 10 Mar 2008).

Wendy Brown, in her essay 'Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', describes the interest that neo-liberalism has in exerting power through a social system.⁵⁷⁴ Neo-liberals view neither the market nor rational economic behaviour by individuals as a natural phenomenon; instead the markets require moulding and directing to achieve a society that behaves in a neo-liberal way. Education-systems, political-party policies and legal-interpretations are all strategically manipulating social-behaviour to reinforce a neo-liberal ideology. In education, for example, the teaching of multiculturalism is being transformed into the teaching of trans-nationalism with the aim of easing the transition to a perception of the state as a disempowered structure.⁵⁷⁵ Political-party policy is aimed at focusing public policy on the market.

The state is now the manager of the market and not the facilitator of the public sphere where individuals give expression to their agency. In evidence of this trend, in the Australian Senate, foreign countries are referred to as our competitors rather than as other nations.⁵⁷⁶ In a recent Senate committee report regarding the introduction of an emissions trading scheme, the argument was put forward that Australia should only act after it has been determined whether or not an economic advantage would ensue from the introduction of the scheme.⁵⁷⁷

The result of the neo-liberal ideological structuring of society is that the public sphere has been branded as an economic marketplace.

574 Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event*, Vol 7, iss 1, (2003).

575 Katharyne Mitchell "Educating the National Citizen in Neoliberal Times: From the Multicultural Self to the Strategic Cosmopolitan" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28, No. 4 (Dec., 2003): 392

576 Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes., *Interim report - the Carbon Tax : economic pain for no environmental gain*, (Canberra, October 2011)
http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/scrutinynewtaxes_ctte/carbontax/interim_report/c04.htm (accessed November 1, 2011).

577 Ibid.

Far from flourishing when left alone, the economy must be directed, buttressed, and protected by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms designed to facilitate competition, free trade, and rational economic action on the part of every member and institution of society.⁵⁷⁸

On Brown's view, neo-liberalism represents an invasion of the public sphere. In the same way that post-totalitarian ideology required a transformation of human action in order to sustain its existence, neo-liberalism requires a transformation of action in order to sustain its existence. The importance of the public sphere, as the arena of a life in truth, is paramount for Havel; hence, the "buttressing" and "protections" required by neoliberalism are a threat to meaningful public action by diluting it.

Havel's concern with the political manipulation of language to coerce behaviour from citizens, which I outlined in (Chapter 6,) is a very fitting counterpoint to neoliberal manipulations of the law and the economy to promote the market as the creator of social norms. For example, the lack of freedom in the market, instituted under the banner of freedom for the market, is something to be concerned about. The misuse of the word 'freedom' to describe an increase in authoritarian-like governmental policy, also under the banner of neoliberalism, is a phenomenon for concern - and Havel's liberalism, with its emphasis on state neutrality is a fitting treatment. The life in truth, which avoids the pitfalls of ideological coercion, is an authentic counterpoint to the neoliberal citizen who views their own life as an apolitical project to be maximised. In this connection we should recall Patočka's shaken, who in solidarity are ready to change society. We should also recall Havel's power of the powerless. Real political response can be found in these

⁵⁷⁸ Brown "Neoliberalism and the End of Democracy," 4.

perspectives. Havel's liberal agonism can be used as an escape from being fed as fodder for a neoliberal ideological structure, which sells the image of the market as the seedbed of civic virtue to promote its own ideological ends.

In his book *Summer Meditations*, written during Havel's second year as President and published just months before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Havel writes about the economic task of the Government. Havel wishes to introduce free market practices into the Czech economy; however he is being cautious about implementing a fully neo-liberal system. His main concern is an overwhelming tidal wave of consumerism might ultimately alter the Czech identity irreparably. He concludes that allowing a massive construction boom to destroy the feel of Czech cities would be dangerous; so too would creating legislation to gradually remove the role of the state so that eventually the state would become little more than a collector of taxes to support infrastructure that cannot be supported privately.⁵⁷⁹ Havel's liberal agonism is a moral counterpoint to the diminished role of the state in a neoliberal ideology. Havel writes, "systems are there to serve people, not the other way around. This is what ideologies always forget. It is a fatal error. Communism has shown us, most graphically, where such forgetting leads."⁵⁸⁰ Hence, for Havel, the market is to be viewed as an enabler of economic growth.

Economic growth is not to come at the expense of a morally responsible direction for the nation. In his article 'A Call for Sacrifice: The Co-responsibility of the West' Havel writes;

The economic advances of Euro-American civilization, based as they are on advances in scientific and technical knowledge, have gradually altered man's very value systems. Respect for the metaphysical horizons of his being is, to

⁵⁷⁹ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 65-79.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid 71

an increasing extent, pushed aside to make room for a new deity: the ideal of perpetual growth of production and consumption.⁵⁸¹

For Havel, to avoid this disaster, a global market should not be expected to assume the role of the nation state, and ideology should not inform political decisions. The state, according to Havel, is there to facilitate a responsible direction for the nation. That is, as well as overseeing the market, the state has a responsibility to ensure the existence of civil society – a public space in which citizens engage in authentic political discourse and initiate authentic political action. A liberal agonism is hence pragmatic, since the institutions that are set up by the state and are held accountable by the citizenry are non-ideological in their foundation. Ideals such as perpetual growth should not be a consideration of political decision makers.

Havel's problems with neoliberalism formed the basis of his long running dispute with his Prime Minister Václav Klaus, who was a committed neo-liberal. Havel, as I have mentioned, was not anti-market. Instead, he was anti-market-as-ideology. Pontusso claims that Havel saw the market as a possible seed of a morality in which "everything belongs to someone – which means that someone is responsible for everything."⁵⁸² However, for Havel, the market only works if other social institutions are in a healthy state as well. Hence, for Havel, good government is not about creating the perfect conditions for the market to flourish, and (as a neoliberal would put it), allowing the rest to follow. Instead, for Havel, a market can only flourish when a healthy civil society exists.⁵⁸³ A further utilisation of Havel's writing, in the debate around the politics of

581 Havel "A Call for Sacrifice," 2.

582 Havel *Summer Meditations* ,62.

583 Ibid.

neoliberalism, would be a breath of fresh air against a stale ideology which in the process of destroying civil society.

One of the most dangerous side-effects of the neoliberal state is the increasing emphasis on security to protect our ability to freely exchange our goods.⁵⁸⁴ Many thinkers have written about the increase in authoritarian-like measures that states have adopted in the name of protecting our security and our freedom. Havel's liberal agonism has much to add to the discussion. Damian Cox, Michael Levine and Saul Newman suggest that a term to use when considering some of the decreases in liberty in the name of liberty might be 'extra judicial,' in that the sovereign state acts outside the law to enforce 'protection'.⁵⁸⁵ James Bovard, in his book *Attention Deficit Democracy*, argues that the US government has used the war on terror as a means of increasing its control over citizens. He argues that the state exploits citizen's desire for security and through a politics of fear mongering has reduced civil liberties.⁵⁸⁶ Such a claim is also contained in the analysis of contemporary politics made by Giorgio Agamben who, argued against Schmitt's claim that a weakness of liberal democracy was its inability to provide a sovereign who could act outside the law.⁵⁸⁷ For Agamben, the existence of phenomena such as Guantanamo Bay, the Patriot Act, detention without trial, torture and extra judicial killing with drones, are evidence that the state today has created a permanent state of exception.⁵⁸⁸ For Agamben, modern liberal democracies have engaged in a

584 I agree with the argument put forward by Cox, Levine and Newman that the current political climate can be regarded as a politics attempting to immunize itself against the threat of terror (or another 'outside' threat), and in so doing undermining its democratic foundation (p.15).

585 Damian Cox, Michael Levine, & Saul Newman, *Politics Most Unusual; Violence, Sovereignty and Democracy in the 'War on Terror'*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 68-70.

586 James Bovard, *Attention Deficit Democracy*, (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

587 Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), 34.

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 13-15.

biopolitics of increasing their control over all of the features of citizens lives. Biopolitics is a concept Agamben has borrowed from Michel Foucault. Biopolitics is the exertion of power over all aspects of an individual's life in all of their spheres of interaction.

Agamben also builds on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the status of refugees, arguing that there is a strong link between human rights and the nation state.⁵⁸⁹ For Agamben, and Arendt, endowing the refugee with rights represents a challenge to the sovereignty of the state. Agamben describes a photograph of a starving child in Rwanda that represents a clear split between "natality and nationality"⁵⁹⁰. Hence the experience of the refugee is an escape from the biopower the state exerts over citizens through its promise to endow the citizens with rights.⁵⁹¹ I think that it is precisely in such a situation that Havel's thought shows its contemporary utility. Against the backdrop of the state of exception, the liberal agonist political philosophy which rests on the power of the powerless, is a meaningful response. Havel's political philosophy, showing how an individual in a polis deceives themselves, is not only pertinent, but a unique contribution to the critique of the current political situation for those who are worried by the trend towards more authoritarian politics. Agamben, and others, are right to point out the disastrous politics of extra-legal law makers; however, I think that Havel needs to be considered in more detail as someone who can shed light on our own problems. His ideas emphasise dealing with the world as it appears to us, and as we live in it. This is in contrast with Agamben

588 In the *The State of Exception*, Agamben writes that the Patriot Act, in allowing the attorney general to place into custody "any alien suspected of activities that endangered the "national security if the United States"" has created a new political reality which "radically erases any legal status of the individual" (3) This has lead, in Agamben's eyes to the non-legal status of individuals held prisoner in Guantanamo Bay who are denied the basic rights set out in the Geneva Convention on the rights of prisoners of war (3-4).

See Georgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

589 Georgio Agamben, *Homer Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 131.

590 Ibid 131-132.

591 Ibid.

who argues that the world should be radically transformed through the experience of the refugee or some other individual abandoned by the state, because essentially, all states are nihilistic in their juridical appropriation of ethics.⁵⁹²

I am not convinced by Agamben's conclusions. There is something deeply problematic about valorising the plight of a refugee in Rwanda, and this is precisely Havel's liberal agonism is pertinent. Havel's liberal agonist state encourages the use of art and aesthetics to create the impetus to challenge the immoral use of 'biopower' or some other authoritarian wielding of power. Whereas Agamben believes that the space of politics has been lost forever through a contamination of the law, Havel's liberal agonism is less pessimistic, arguing that politics can not only be recovered, but reinvigorated.

The world today is far from perfect. I am concerned about the loss of political action and the attack on liberal values that is common in media discourse. Now, as it was in late socialist Czechoslovakia, it is timely and appropriate to hear the voice of a thinker who argues clearly for an authentic approach to action. Who argues for a recognition of the linked-ness of our actions and hence our mutual responsibility for ourselves, towards each other and towards the world. To hear the voice of a thinker who argues that all is not lost and that we do not find ourselves on a downwards spiral to nihilism.

Havel's legacy, I have contended throughout this thesis, is not limited to his role as dissident in the cold war. Havel offers a political philosophy which is a unique brand of liberalism that is philosophically rich and worthy of future study.

⁵⁹² The meaning of 'Homer Sacer' comes from Roman law and designates a person who can be killed but not sacrificed. Someone who is outside of the law's domain. For Agamben, there is the possibility of a radical transformation of the world through the idea of Homer Sacer, hence his analysis of the experience of the refugee and the concentration camp.

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